天地無用！魎皇鬼

よいこのせいかつ編

長谷川菜穂子

イラスト 大和田直之

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

The Life of The Good Child

By Naoko Hasegawa

Novel 8

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
(April 2026)

For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Prologue: February 16th – Sunny

Sasami's Diary

I'll try writing today's diary like a "good girl" would! ♡

Let's see... today was my turn for cleaning duty, so I, Sasami, was scrubbing the floors with a rag. Then, Big Sister Ayeka knocked over a bucket and flooded the hallway! She told me it was my fault for leaving the bucket there! I wanted to say something back, but she was scary, so I stayed quiet.

While Big Brother Tenchi went to find dry rags, Washu-chan came by and scattered some seeds from her pocket. "Poor Sasami-chan. Leave it to Washu-chan," she said with a grin.

The seeds sprouted in an instant! They sucked up all the water in the hallway, then sucked the water out of the rags, and started growing vines everywhere. Then they stretched into the kitchen, sucked the water out of the pots and kettles, attached themselves to the faucet, and grew huge. The inside of the house looked like a jungle!

Big Sister Ryoko got mad and chopped a vine, and water sprayed out like a fountain and soaked me! When Big Brother Tenchi yelled, "Washu-san, knock it off!", Washu-chan just said, "Now, now, Lord Tenchi."

The "Ghost Ivy" grew fruit that looked like beach balls and started storing all the water inside them. It even sucked the water out of my kimono, so I didn't have to change clothes! Once all the water was collected, Washu-chan picked a fruit with a smile.

"The Miracle Juice is ready! Give it a try," she said. I thought, *Wait, isn't that floor-cleaning water?* But it was a beautiful melon color, so I took a sip through a straw. It was super delicious! She calls it "Emergency Filtration Plant No. 3."

The older sisters forgot all about what they’d done and drank the juice happily. There was so much left over we had to carry it to the storehouse. Big Brother Tenchi had to clean up the jungle mess. I really think Washu-chan is a genius! I'm glad Sis kicked that bucket. Next time, I hope it’s a tree that grows candy.

Chapter 1: Heart-Warming ♡

"I’m gonna do it...!"

Ryoko—former space pirate turned flying human (?) and ultimate weapon—clenched her fist with renewed determination inside the Masaki family's famous mid-air hot spring.

"This time, I’m getting Tenchi! A lot has happened, but now that we’re finally back on Earth, if I keep doing the same old thing, we’ll just stay 'good friends' forever. This year, I’m going hard and wild. I swear on this cup of sake, I’ll steal Tenchi away!!"

With a firm resolve, she downed the sake from the cup she held high.

It was March. Our protagonist, Tenchi, had returned safely from his travels through space. By April, he would be a high school sophomore—the age to start preparing for entrance exams.

Tenchi was in the men’s bath, silently staring at the clear sky through a transparent dome. His mind was empty. No stray thoughts. A brain scan would likely show nothing but alpha waves. To an outsider, he just looked spaced out, but having experienced things an average human wouldn't face in a lifetime, Tenchi had changed. His physique was leaner, his expression more composed. He had, quite literally, leveled up; he had become an adult.

A small silhouette appeared at the entrance. "Lord Tenchi, are you there?" It was Washu’s voice.

"I’m here," Tenchi replied, as if waking from a dream.

"Sorry to bother you. I have to head out suddenly. I should be back in two or three days, so could you tell everyone?"

"Sure," Tenchi said, watching her silhouette through the frosted glass. This bath was one of Washu’s masterpieces, but unlike Ryoko, she never came to peek at the men’s side. "Is something wrong?"

"Lord Tenchi, how is the water temperature?" the genius scientist asked, uncharacteristically.

"It’s perfect." Tenchi wondered if she had something private to discuss. "Washu-san, did something happen?"

"No, it’s nothing, but..." Washu’s reply was uncharacteristically hesitant. "Actually, I’m attending a conference at the Galaxy Academy starting tomorrow. Do you want to come? Lots of big shots will be there; I can introduce you."

So that was it. She didn't want the noise of Ryoko or Ayeka, so she came to the bath to tell him. Recently, Washu had begun showing him this kind of quiet respect. It was a change since their return from space.

"No, there's no point in me going. I'll watch the house. Have a safe trip."

"I see... Well, it should be fine. If you run into trouble, contact me via Ansible. See ya."

Her silhouette moved away. Tenchi got out of the water and began washing, feeling a bit unsettled. Suddenly, something black flashed across the corner of his vision.

"Ryo-Ohki?" Tenchi turned his head toward the rocky outdoor area, but everything looked normal. "What was that?" He tilted his head, but soon forgot about it.

"Oh, Ryoko-san."

As Ryoko was enjoying her sake, Ayeka entered gracefully, dressed in a fresh bath robe. "Drinking again?"

The pattern was normal so far. Suddenly, the sliding door rattled open. The Galaxy Police’s "strongest" duo, Mihoshi and Kiyone, burst in.

"Big Sisster~!" "Myan!"

Sasami and Ryo-Ohki tumbled in after them. "Yay! Everyone's together! ♡"

With five people and one cabbit, the water level in the women's bath surged. "Hey! The sake! You're gonna spill the sake!" Ryoko scrambled to lift her tray.

"It’s more fun when we all get in together!" Sasami beamed at her sister. "We don't even have to go to a resort when we have a hot spring at home. Washu-chan really is a genius."

Ayeka ruffled her brows at the splashing, but then let out a long sigh of relaxation. "It does feel good... everything that happened feels like a dream. Ryoko-san, shall I pour you a drink?"

Ryoko flinched. Ayeka was smiling as she offered the sake bottle. "...Hey, did your personality change or something?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Ayeka leaned in, her smile unwavering. "I’ve become a bit more of an adult. I realized that having petty fights with you is a waste of precious time. Just being back on Earth and by Lord Tenchi’s side is happiness enough. I’ve decided to cherish that. Here, please."

"Uh, yeah..." Ryoko took the cup, looking bewildered.

"Come, have more." Ayeka refilled the cup and leaned even closer. "Thinking about it, you’ve had a hard life, Ryoko-san. Growing up without knowing a 'home-cooked' environment... it’s only natural you're a bit violent and rude. I feel terrible for being so critical before."

"You..." Ryoko was speechless. This was creepy. She had never seen Ayeka like this.

"I’ve been so selfish," Ayeka said, her cheeks flushing a soft cherry-blossom pink as she looked up at Ryoko. "When I think of the trouble I've caused everyone, I could just crawl into a hole. Ryoko-san, can you forgive me for everything I've said?"

Her expression looked less like she was begging for forgiveness and more like she was coaxing a kiss. Seen from this close, the contrast between her black hair and her translucent white skin was strangely alluring. Faced with an approach like this, most men would gladly spiral into ruin.

Ryoko’s hair stood on end, bristling. "Ayeka..."

Ryoko instinctively set down her sake cup and sat upright in the water. An alarm was blaring in the corner of her mind: *If Ayeka gets any closer, do I kiss her or deck her?*

"Hey, hey." Sasami, watching with wide eyes, poked Mihoshi's arm. "Big sister is acting weird..."

"...Yeah." Mihoshi exchanged a look with Kiyone. "Co-could it be? Is Ayeka-san... in love with Ryoko-san!?"

Splash!

"Don't say such stupid things!" Kiyone shoved Mihoshi's head under the water.

"Hey! Kiyone, I swallowed some!" A soaking-wet Mihoshi glared resentfully at her partner.

"Ayeka!" The commotion seemed to break the spell holding Ryoko frozen. "Act like you usually do! The hell are you doing making eyes at me? If you keep talking crazy, I'm gonna floor you. You and I are enemies, remember? If you think you're gonna butter me up, it ain't gonna work. Got it?"

"Ryoko-san?" Ayeka looked back at Ryoko and beamed. "Oh, don't say such things. Let's just... get along, shall we? ♡"

"Waaaaagh!" Ryoko bolted out of the bathtub. "Do something! I can't hit her when she's like this! Shoo! Get away! Don't come near me! Don't touch me!" Her face was twitching.

Ayeka, who had stood up to chase Ryoko, suddenly stopped. She looked down, her shoulders trembling.

"Big sister!?" Sasami called out timidly. "What's wrong? You're scaring Big Sister Ryoko."

Then, suddenly...

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho!" A burst of ridiculous laughter exploded. "Oh, that was priceless! Ryoko-san, you're quite the innocent, aren't you? My suggestion wasn't anything to be *that* frightened of. Listen well: I am not the woman I was before. This year, I shall become a soft and mellow adult woman to capture Lord Tenchi's heart. So, Ryoko-san, I look forward to working with you! ♡"

Laughing loudly, Ayeka sat on the edge of the tub and elegantly crossed her legs to cool off.

"Huh?" Mihoshi and Kiyone, who had been watching with bated breath, looked at each other.

"She seems serious..."

"An adult woman... wait, how old is Ayeka-san again?"

"Let’s see... seven hundred and twenty-one?"

"At that age, it wouldn't be strange if she’d grown up a long time ago. Her mental age must be finally waking up to catch up with her actual age. A lot has happened, after all."

"True, true. Maybe she achieved some kind of enlightenment while chasing Tenchi-san..."

"What 'enlightenment'!?" A haggard-looking Ryoko slowly crept back. "'Let’s get along ♡'? Speaking with little hearts at the end of her sentences... that girl must have picked up some bad brainwaves from space. Man, that shock sobered me right up."

Grumbling, Ryoko pulled a large sake bottle from behind a rock and started chugging it in desperation. Just then...

"Myan?" Ryo-Ohki, perched on Sasami’s head, pricked her ears up.

"Hm? Is someone here?" Ryoko remembered the one member not present and looked toward the door. "Speaking of which, why didn't Washu come?"

"Myan!" Ryo-Ohki hopped down onto a rock and began looking around restlessly.

"What is it? A cockroach?" Ryoko felt like a cockroach would be easier to deal with than an "adult and mellow" Ayeka. She stood up, still drinking from the bottle. Ryo-Ohki leaped from the rocks and ran toward the washing area, peeking behind buckets and sticking her nose into the shrubbery.

"Hey, what are you looking for?" Ryoko tossed the empty bottle aside and grabbed a fresh one.

"Myah!" Ryo-Ohki suddenly jumped back. Something black was peeking out from the shadows of the bushes.

"What’s this?" It was black and round. It had two eyes. It was about the size of a ball of yarn and strangely glossy. Ryoko set down her bottle and crouched to get a better look. Suddenly, it stretched its body and stood up.

"Waamu ♡"

"Eh?" The black caterpillar with eyes hopped once and landed right on Ryoko's knee.

"Wah!?" She instinctively brushed it off.

"Waamu ♡" The caterpillar went *hop, hop, hop* and fell right into the bath.

"Oh no!" Sasami reached out reflexively. At that instant, the hot bathwater turned into freezing cold water.

"Kyaa!" Sasami scrambled out of the tub, followed by the confused Mihoshi and Kiyone.

"W-what is going on!?"

"Did it say something...?"

The caterpillar poked its head out of the water. "Waamu ♡" It crawled onto the edge of the tub and curled up, looking up at Sasami. "Waamu?"

Sasami looked down at it tentatively. "Waaaamu ♡" The caterpillar stood up and swayed happily.

"...I think it needs a heart mark." Sasami looked up at her sister, puzzled. "It must be named 'Wormy-chan' ♡."

Ayeka, who hated bugs, had been frozen with her legs pulled up on the edge of the tub, but she suddenly snapped out of it and ran away. "Get rid of it! I despise insects!" She hid behind a rock, peeking out to give orders. "Ryoko-san, do something!" Her "adult and mellow" vow seemed to have been left far behind.

"Forget it! I don't want anything to do with a bug that comes with heart marks!" Ryoko scowled. "Heart marks?" She walked over to the rock where Ayeka was hiding and dragged her out by the arm. "I get it! You started talking with those stupid hearts and summoned this weird bug! It's your fault! You throw it away!"

"How dare you!?" Ayeka shook her arm free. "What do I have to do with this bug? You probably were secretly keeping it as a pet!" Ayeka shivered. Since the hot water had turned cold, the temperature in the bathhouse had dropped. "It's freezing! Do something about this!"

While the two naked women argued, Mihoshi picked up the worm and peered at it curiously. "Hey there, Mr. Worm ♡. Could you heat the bath up again? It’s a bit early in the season for cold baths~"

"Waamu ♡" The caterpillar squirmed, slipped through Mihoshi’s fingers, and split into two.

"Kya?" The twin caterpillars dove into the tub, making two small splashes. Like magic, the surface of the water split in half; steam began to billow from one side. It made a bubbling sound. It was clearly boiling.

"...Uh." Mihoshi, speechless for a moment, dipped a finger into the half that wasn't boiling. "This side is cold. So, I just have to stir it. Thanks, Mr. Worm ♡!"

A smack from Kiyone’s palm hit the back of Mihoshi’s head. "Ow..."

"That’s not the point! Why are you thanking it with heart marks!?"

"Waamu ♡" The twin caterpillars stood up from the water, swaying worriedly. In the next instant, they became four, and the water surface split into four sections: two boiling, two freezing.

"Waamu ♡" Before Kiyone could blink, there were eight worms and the water was a checkerboard of eight sections.

"W-wait a minute..."

The worms became sixteen. Sixteen became thirty-two, thirty-two became sixty-four, and sixty-four became a hundred and twenty-eight. It took only two seconds. In the next second, there were two hundred and fifty-six worms, and the multiplication stopped only when the tub was completely full.

"W-what should we do, Kiyone?" Even Mihoshi was stunned.

"Don't ask me, ask Washu!" Kiyone, her common sense center having crashed, was in a daze.

"B-bugs... so many bugs..." Ayeka collapsed, staring blankly at the tub.

"Waaaaah... I can't take a bath anymore. Someone call Washu-chan!" Sasami pleaded with Ryoko while crying. Ryoko snapped out of her stupor.

"Alright! Leave it to me!" A glowing orb of light appeared in Ryoko’s hand. She planned to blow them away with a shockwave.

"No, stop, Ryoko-san!" Ayeka had a sudden flash of a nightmare scenario where dead caterpillars were scattered all over the water.

"Take this!"

Too late. Before the shockwave could hit, the 256 worms leaped out at once, scattering in every direction. A quintet of screams filled the room.

"Noooo! Sasami's getting out of here!" Led by Sasami, the five naked women bolted for the door. "Waaaaah, Washu-chaaaan!"

The glass door was flung open. Sasami froze. "There's no... outside..."

Beyond the door lay the vast, empty void of outer space.

"...What is this??" Kiyone gasped behind her. Fortunately, there seemed to be an invisible barrier between the bathhouse and space, so they weren't sucked out immediately. Turning pale, Sasami slid the door shut and leaned against it. "Big sister... we can't go home."

None of the four older sisters said a word.

Meanwhile, Tenchi, who was still soaking in his bath in a daze, leaned against the granite and started to drift off before snapping his head up. "Oops... better get out now."

He wrapped a towel around his waist and casually opened the sliding door. "Wh...!?"

Where the changing room should have been, a vast, desolate desert stretched out. The sand was a blood-like red, the two suns in the sky were green, and the sky was a sickly yellowish-brown. Tenchi slammed the door shut twice as fast as he had opened it.

"W-what the hell!?" *Where did my underwear and clothes go?* A misplaced question flickered through his mind. Leaning against the glass door, he replayed the scene in his head. "That wasn't Earth..." Cold sweat trickled down his forehead. "Wait, it couldn't be Ryoko, could it?" Given her track record, she was the natural first suspect.

But at that moment, Ryoko was in the ladies' bath, holding up a worm and shouting at it. "Is this your fault!? Put us back where we belong! What the hell are you things, multiplying like that!?"

Zap!

A shock like an electric current ran through Ryoko’s hand. "Ow!" Startled, she dropped the worm, which seized the chance to vanish into the bushes.

"Why you...!!" Her blood boiling, Ryoko instantly transformed into her battle suit and drew her aura blade. "I'll cut you to ribbons! Get ready!"

She began racing around the bathhouse chasing worms peeking from the floor and rocks. Her original goal of finding the cause of the anomaly was tossed into the far reaches of space.

"Stop, stop, stop it!!" Ayeka’s scream echoed. "Don't break the bathhouse! It's outer space out there! If you poke a hole in it, we'll be space-walking in this state!"

"Waamu ♡" The worms gleefully ran away, leaving rainbow-colored footprints wherever their feet—or tails—touched.

"Oh, heart marks!" Sasami crouched down and scratched at a rainbow footprint. "Huh, it’s not a sticker."

Meanwhile, Mihoshi crept back into the tub and timidly dipped her finger into the water. "Is it back to normal?" A happy voice rang out a moment later. "Kiyo-chan, the bath is just right now~"

Kiyone, who was about to check the outside again, nearly slipped. "Mihoshi! What on earth are you doing!?"

"Myan! Myan myan myan!" Ryo-Ohki, who had been watching the worms, flew over to Ryoko and began pleading toward the door.

"What? Is there something else outside?" Ryoko vanished her aura blade and strode toward the door.

On his end, Tenchi slammed the door shut against a world of swirling ice and snow. This was the eleventh time. Every time he opened the door, a different world appeared. Once it was scorching solar flares, once a landscape of strange standing stones, once giant ferns and dinosaurs, and once a pitch-black abyss that looked like a psychological manifestation.

Once, a landscape that looked like a modern shopping district appeared, but Tenchi had closed the door in a panic. He still couldn't find his clothes.

"Washu-san... what do I do?" he muttered, nearly in tears. He tried banging on the walls and shouting, but there was no reaction from the women's bath next door.

Never dreaming he'd face such a crisis in his own home's hot springs, Tenchi shivered, clutching his single towel. *I just want to know if they're okay... if the ladies' bath is safe, I can get out through their door.*

Deciding to break through the wall, Tenchi clasped his hands with a serious expression. The crest of power appeared on his forehead, and the Master Key materialized. "Washu-san, sorry!"

Tenchi swung the Master Key toward the wall. Just then, the sliding door burst open, and Ryoko's stunned voice flew in. "Tenchi!?"

"Eh?"

"Tenchi-sama!?"

The women huddled behind Ryoko screamed and dove into the bathtub.

"Ryoko!!"

Apparently, the entrance to the men's bath and the women's bath had become connected. Tenchi, having stumbled into the ladies' bath, felt dizzy at the sight of the harem in the tub. He instinctively tried to leave through the door he'd just entered.

"Don't go, Tenchi!" Ryoko shouted.

Tenchi jumped and pulled his foot back, closing the door out of habit.

"Wah! Tenchi, don't close it!!"

"Ah..."

That was right. Just because the door had been connected just now didn't mean it would be the next time.

"Sorry." Tenchi hurriedly opened the door. Immediately, a massive amorphous creature appeared with a terrifying roar.

"Waaaagh!?" Tenchi slammed the door shut at near-supersonic speed, locking out the roar and the monster. "...Whew, that was scary."

Tenchi turned around to find the four beautiful women in the tub frozen like ice sculptures. "I’m sorry." Out of habit, he apologized. "I have no idea how it ended up like this..."

"Where is that damn Washu!?" Ryoko snapped at him, looking like she might tackle him. "I knew it. She did something. I bet she’s in her lab laughing her head off right now. That’s just the kind of person she is. Tenchi, go tell her that if she doesn't get us out, I’ll blow up her lab! I've had enough. Bugs, space, cold water, and I’m hungry... what time is it?"

A famous line from a classic comedy skit flashed through Tenchi’s mind. "Five o'clock... no, that's not it!" Even in the bath, cold sweat was pouring down Tenchi's face. "Washu-san is out. I don't think she's home. She said she was invited to some conference at the Galaxy Academy..."

"Aaaaagh!!" Ryoko let out a roar that echoed through the bathhouse. "She ran away!!"

"Now that you mention it, she did say to let her know via the ansible if we had any trouble."

"I knew she knew!"

Leaving the raging Ryoko aside, a slightly more rational Kiyone huddled with Ayeka and the others in the tub, whispering. "...Anyway, something went wrong with the system controlling this aerial bathhouse. I didn't know 'Worms' looked like that, but maybe they got into the system and altered the data..."

"Right, right," Mihoshi chimed in. "Like how cockroaches get into PCs because they're warm. I bet these Worm-sans are the same. If there weren't so many of them, they'd be kind of cute."

"Big sister, can I keep one as a pet?"

"Absolutely not!!"

They were clearly having a conversation that wasn't very helpful. "Waamu ♡" Before they knew it, many worms had gathered around the tub, stretching and shrinking. Tenchi stared blankly at the swarm. *It’s better not to ask*. His intuition told him so.

"Myau?" Ryo-Ohki meowed at his feet. At that moment, a flash of inspiration hit Tenchi.

"That's it! Ryo-Ohki! If we turn Ryo-Ohki into her spaceship mode, we can escape from here..."

"That's it!!" Ryoko's eyes sparkled. "Brilliant! You really are the man I picked. Hey, Ayeka! Get out of the tub! Don't just sit there. I'm opening the door!"

Ryoko flung the door open. Outside was an endless sea of jelly from some unknown planet. "Ryo-Ohki!!"

"Myaaaaan!" Ryo-Ohki leaped outside and instantly transformed into her spaceship mode.

"Let's go, Tenchi!" Ryoko jumped onto Ryo-Ohki and disappeared inside.

"Tenchi-sama, please! Close your eyes!"

"Y-yes!" At Ayeka's voice, Tenchi squeezed his eyes shut. He felt something soft and bouncy rush past him.

"Sorry, Tenchi-san! ♡"

"Excuse us!"

The ones who ran past like the wind were surely Mihoshi and Kiyone.

"Tenchi-niichan, you can open your eyes now." A small hand tapped his arm.

"Sasami-chan?" A naked Sasami, looking like a fairy from a picture book, was smiling up at him. "Sasami is still a kid. Tenchi-niichan, let's go together!"

"Yeah." Tenchi gripped Sasami's hand tight, and they jumped on the count of three.

Carrying the five women and the young man, Ryo-Ohki accelerated away from the door of the aerial bathhouse and vanished.

Two days later, Washu returned early from the conference. Hearing from a frantic Nobuyuki that Tenchi and the others had gone to the aerial bathhouse and never come back, she went out to the garden. Peeking through the door, she saw 256 worms joyfully hopping around in the empty bathhouse.

Washu sighed and went straight to her lab to start typing. To exterminate the worms, of course. The system was repaired and the bathhouse returned to normal, but Tenchi and the others did not return.

It happened the following day. With a *thud*, Ryo-Ohki landed in the Masaki garden.

"Washu! Is that damn Washu back!?" A furious Ryoko in her battle suit climbed out, followed by Tenchi and the others wrapped in whatever blankets and sheets they could find.

"Welcome home, Ryoko. Welcome home, Tenchi-dono." A rare, smiling Washu greeted them in the garden.

"Don't 'welcome home' me! You put us through hell! It took three days to get back from the Solaris Sea!"

"The system agents turned into 'Worms.' I made sure to maintain it before I left, though." Washu looked up at Ryoko calmly. "I fixed the aerial bathhouse, so it’s fine now. I left your clothes there, so go ahead and take a bath. Ryo-Ohki doesn't have a bath, so you must be tired, right?"

"N-no thanks. I'll just use the bath in the house." Tenchi shook his head and hurried through the front door, still wrapped in a blanket.

"I’ll pass as well." Ayeka followed, wrapped tightly in a sheet like a mummy.

"What happened to the Worm-sans?"

"Why did it end up like that?"

Mihoshi and Kiyone, covered in sheets like a pair of ghosts, asked.

"Well, for some reason the program was full of heart marks and I couldn't delete them. The cause is unknown. The worms are gone, though."

Mihoshi and Kiyone looked at each other, and Ayeka turned around, blushing. "I don't know anything about that!" She vanished into the house at top speed.

"Are the Wormy-chans all gone?" Sasami asked sadly, trailing her sheet behind her.

"Yes, well. They don't make very good pets. Come on, let's go inside."

As Washu pushed Sasami along, Mihoshi missed her chance to ask why the worms were attracted to heart marks. Afterward, Ayeka disposed of all the heart-shaped cushions in the living room, and the relationship between the worms and the heart marks remained an eternal mystery.

Diary Entry: March 27th (Cloudy)

Phew... I finally made it back home.

The Wormy-chans were so cute, though. I should have brought one back with me... then I could have used a rainbow heart stamp in this diary.

But, but! I'm so happy because I got to hold hands with Tenchi-niichan today ♡. If it's Tenchi-niichan, I don't mind if he sees me ♡.

Oh, but since I'm a girl, maybe I should have said something like "Eek! ♡"? Big Sister Ayeka screams all the time, but it doesn't seem to work very well.

Tenchi-niichan's hand was so big and warm and wonderful ♡. I really want to grow up fast. Then, Tenchi-niichan and I could... ♡

Oh no, my diary is full of hearts! ♡

That day, Washu did not show up for breakfast.

The Masaki household had become such a large family that it wasn't uncommon for someone to be missing from the table, but on this morning, even after everything was ready, Washu's seat remained empty. Sasami looked around at the "core members" while serving the rice—the group that, no matter what, was always there for breakfast.

"Make mine a large serving," the former space pirate Ryoko said.

"Yes, yes, I know," Sasami replied, heaping rice into a bowl. She had never once heard Ryoko ask for a "half-serving."

"Just a light portion for me," her sister Ayeka requested.

"Yes, yes," Sasami answered, but she served a normal portion anyway. She knew that if she truly gave Ayeka a light serving, her sister would get hungry and grumpy before ten o'clock.

"Grandfather and Father are having the usual, right? You too, Tenchi-niichan?" Sasami handed the bowls to Nobuyuki, Katsuhito, and Tenchi.

"Ah, yeah..." Tenchi, as always, had no complaints.

"Well then, let’s eat!"

A peaceful silence followed for a while. Then, Sasami looked up. "I wonder what happened to Washu-chan?"

"Now that you mention it... I haven't seen her since yesterday." Tenchi stopped his chopsticks and glanced toward the hallway. Beneath the stairs was a storage closet, and the closet door led to Washu’s laboratory in sub-space.

"She’s probably just working on something," Ryoko muttered. She didn't care what Washu did, and Ayeka—who generally didn't care about anyone but herself—didn't even bother to respond.

Once breakfast was over, Nobuyuki left for work, Katsuhito returned to the shrine, and Tenchi went out to the fields. Sasami turned the thought over in her mind again. "She’s never skipped breakfast before..."

George, the robot who had become Washu’s secretary but spent more time in the kitchen than the lab, poked his head out after finishing the dishes. "Is something the matter, Princess Sasami?"

"Oh, George-san. What happened to Washu-chan?"

"This morning’s simmered dish was great, by the way," Ryoko chimed in, lounging lazily on the sofa.

"That was *wakatakeni* (simmered bamboo shoots and seaweed)," George informed her politely. "I dug them up this morning. Earth has truly wonderful ingredients. I’ve been busy with the preparations since early morning, so I haven't seen my Master since last night, either."

"Hmm..." Sasami looked outside with a strange feeling. The sky was a hazy pastel blue, and warm sunlight flooded the garden. It was perfect weather for a picnic. "And I was thinking of going flower viewing today, too."

"Flower viewing?" Ryoko sat up.

"Oh, how lovely!" Ayeka, who had been plucking dead buds from a flowerpot, turned around. "I’ll go call Lord Tenchi."

"No, wait a second." Sasami stopped her sister. Her uneasy premonition was growing stronger. "George-san, could you go check on Washu-chan for me?"

"Certainly." George ducked his head and disappeared through the storage room door.

Left behind, Ayeka and Ryoko exchanged a glance. Their mutual determination not to yield an inch to the other sent sparks flying. If that energy could be harnessed for the Masaki household, they wouldn't have to worry about the electric bill for a year.

"You're coming to the flower viewing too?" Ryoko asked bluntly.

"Shouldn't you stay home instead?" Ayeka shot back.

"Looking at your face makes the sake taste bad."

"Oh? If a hooligan like you comes along, the beautiful blossoms will surely wilt."

"There they go again," Sasami whispered. These two were fatally lacking in the concept of "progress." "Fine. You two can stay here and fight. I'll go with George-san and Tenchi-niichan."

The two sisters fell silent. Just then, George returned with an uncharacteristic look on his face. "Everyone... you should come see this."

"What's wrong!?" Sasami's heart skipped a beat.

Washu's vast laboratory looked normal—meaning there were no runaway programs, no explosions, and no rampaging amorphous organisms. Washu sat before her monitor, one hand clenched shut, motionless.

"Washu-chan?"

"...U..." Washu's lips moved, whispering something.

"Washu-chan, what's wrong? Look at us!"

Washu turned around slowly. Sasami's heart pounded. Washu's eyes were misty, as if she were running a fever. She looked as though she were wrapped in an invisible shield of happiness.

"...Tau..." Washu gently opened her fist. Something sparkly sat in her palm—tiny, needle-like crystals.

"Her reactions are strange," George whispered. "It's as if she's having a waking dream..."

"Don't worry, George. We have guests coming, so please prepare some tea." Washu raised her hand.

At that moment, the crystals rose from her palm and scattered throughout the room. Thousands of "fairies" seemed to sprinkle magic powder, filling the lab with a shimmer. A faint, sweet-and-sour scent like chamomile tickled their noses.

Suddenly, a child appeared at Sasami’s feet. By human standards, he was a boy just old enough to sit up on his own. His bright yellow-green eyes looked up at Sasami curiously. Soft platinum-blonde curls framed his innocent face, and his features strangely resembled Washu’s.

"Mama?"

"Good boy." Washu knelt and reached out.

The boy seemed to grow taller before their eyes. He stood up, took Washu’s hand, and pointed toward the door. "Are we going flower viewing?"

"Yes!" the boy answered clearly, pulling Washu toward the exit.

"Wait!" Sasami cried out. Something incredibly mysterious was happening.

"What is it, Big Sister?" the boy, now looking about five years old, turned at the door. "Let’s go together, okay?"

As the boy opened the door, the floating crystals flowed out with them.

"Who the hell are you!?" Ryoko shook her head, feeling as though she had blacked out for a second. Danger signals flashed in her mind. *This is... this is...*

"Ryoko." A familiar voice stopped her. A sharp pang shot through her heart. Trembling, she turned around to see someone who shouldn't be there.

"...Seiran!?"

"We're going flower viewing, right?" The pirate with the deep-blue eyes smiled gently, Ryoko’s white handkerchief still tied around his head like a bandana.

"A... you are..." Ayeka felt her breath catch as if colorful sparks had exploded before her eyes. "Nooooo!" She bolted past them and out of the lab.

"Lord Tenchi! Lord Tenchi!!"

Tenchi, who was in the fields, turned at the sound of the desperate voice.

"Lord Tenchi, Washu-san is..." Ayeka was pale, her clothes disheveled and sweat beading on her forehead. "It's strange. I don't understand what's happening. Please, come with me!"

"Ayeka-san, calm down..." Tenchi pulled her close and rubbed her back. "What happened?"

"Oh... Lord Tenchi..." Ayeka buried her face in his chest and sobbed. "It's like they can't see us. A little boy appeared..." She was shaking. This wasn't one of their usual pranks.

"Let’s go, Ayeka-san. Washu-san is at the house, right?" Ayeka nodded and leaned on Tenchi as they walked back.

The moment they opened the front door, the sound of peaceful laughter reached them—Washu, Sasami, and a high-pitched child’s voice.

"Welcome back, Tenchi-dono. You're early, aren't you? We were just planning a flower-viewing trip. Right, Tau?" Washu smiled, placing a hand on the little boy’s head.

"W-Washu-san..." Tenchi felt a sudden sense of unreality. The living room, bathed in spring sunlight, seemed to shimmer down to every particle of air.

"It’s been a while, Prince. Glad to see you’re well." Beside Ryoko stood Seiran, his very real arm draped over Ryoko’s shoulder.

"Seiran!?"

"Why the surprised face? Ryoko called me, so I just came to visit."

"Me too," the boy called Tau said, his clear eyes fixed on Tenchi. "Mama told me to come. This is a nice place."

"Mama..."

"This boy is Washu-chan’s child," Sasami explained with an innocent smile. "I was surprised at first, but I’m okay now. Big Sister, what’s with that face?"

Laughter erupted.

"But... how...?" Ayeka’s gaze wandered in confusion. "This can't be happening. That boy was a baby when I first saw him! And..." She turned to Tenchi. "Why is *he* here? Seiran died back then, didn't he? This is wrong! Are you all ghosts!?"

"Ayeka," Ryoko said, her eyes appearing to wander somewhere far across the universe. "Don't just stand there. Come here. If you think we're ghosts, just touch us and see."

"Everyone, the tea is ready." George entered quietly, carrying a tray of Bizen stoneware and a large plate of *sakuramochi* (cherry blossom rice cakes). "Oh, Tenchi-san. You're back. Would you care for some tea?" George was his usual, calm self.

Tenchi and Ayeka sat down as if in a dream, eating the pink rice cakes and drinking the fragrant tea.

"Tenchi-dono, are you still wondering?" Washu had returned to her usual tone. "I could explain the trick, but that would be tasteless. Just think of it as the **Kirara Effect**." She gave a secretive smile. "Oh, that's right, I haven't introduced him. Tau, say hello."

"Nice to meet you, Tenchi-dono. Nice to meet you, Ayeka-dono. My name is Tau." The boy spoke with the same clear, precise tone as Washu.

"He's my son. He'll be a scientist who surpasses even me one day. But well, that doesn't matter right now." Washu smiled, and the warmth of it spread like a ripple through the room.

"I can smell the flowers..." Ayeka closed her eyes and inhaled. A different door seemed to open in her heart, scattering particles of light behind her eyelids. *Maybe... maybe it isn't so strange. Being here... being together is what matters...*

Ayeka opened her eyes. The turmoil in her heart had vanished. "I'm sorry... I was just so surprised... I acted quite rudely despite your visit. Please, make yourselves at home." She smiled and reached out to the little boy.

"Okay!" The boy took her hand.

Tenchi felt a stir in his heart. Was he really Washu's son? Now that he thought about it... a memory flowed into him. Back when Washu was a student at the Royal Space Academy, she had someone she loved... they had a child... a student marriage...

The memory flickered and faded. *Wait, when did I hear that?*

"Seiran." Tenchi looked into the deep-blue eyes of the pirate he thought he'd never see again. "You were alive? I never got to thank you. What are you doing now? Still a pirate?"

"You bet," Seiran said, his sandy hair shimmering. "Did you forget? I told you I'd always be by Ryoko's side."

"Seiran, I'm sorry." Tenchi reached out and took Seiran's hand. Warmth flowed from the fingers—delicate fingers for a pirate.

"Did you think I was a ghost?" Seiran laughed and squeezed Tenchi's hand. "This is a much nicer way to meet than the first time."

"Hey, if we don't hurry, it'll be lunchtime!" Sasami hopped up. "Let's go flower viewing!"

"You're right. Tenchi-dono, could you help with the preparations? George is making the lunches now."

"Eh? Oh, sure..." Washu's face was bright, her voice bouncing with excitement. Tenchi decided to just go with the flow.

They followed a winding path away from the stone steps of the Masaki Shrine, through trees that looked like they'd been sprayed with bright yellow-green paint, until they reached a small clearing Tenchi used for training. Now, it was covered in a carpet of soft young grass, with Somei Yoshino and Fugenzo cherry trees blooming over the edge of the clearing.

"Wow...!" Sasami ran into the middle of the clearing, spreading her arms and spinning. "It's amazing! It's like a pond surrounded by cherry blossoms!"

"Then let's make a little floating island in the middle. Lord Tenchi, could you spread the mats here?" Ayeka beckoned to Tenchi, who was lugging mats and thermoses.

"We should have invited Mihoshi-san and Kiyone-san, too," Tenchi panted, sweating from the climb. The two Galaxy Police officers had recently moved out of the Masaki house into a small apartment near their part-time jobs, though they visited so often for dinner that it hardly felt like they'd left.

"George is still at the house; if they show up, he'll tell them where we are," Washu said, holding her small son's hand as she looked up at the blossoms. "Tau... it's beautiful, isn't it? I should have called you sooner."

"Yeah..." The blossoms shivered in the breeze like thousands of white butterflies. "I wish I'd been born on this planet."

"If fate comes around, Tau. I'm sure it will."

As Tenchi set up the "island" of mats, a sense of déjà vu washed over him. He remembered being a little boy, held by his mother's hand, looking up at the cherry blossoms. His father had been there, much younger than he was now. He remembered asking why the blossoms had to fall so soon. Now, he knew the answer. Cherry blossoms bring a brief fluctuation to the continuum of space-time. The doors to the "other world" open, the boundaries thin, and guests are drawn in by the scent.

I see... so that's it. What was I so suspicious of? Tenchi realized he no longer cared that Seiran was there.

Then, in the shadow of a particularly magnificent tree, a delicate figure appeared. Clad in a light blue kimono that reflected the hazy sky, she stood with a hand against the trunk, looking up at the blossoms.

"Mother!?" At that moment, desire, memory, and reality fused into one. Tenchi's throat tightened with a happiness that was almost unbearable.

"Tau, go call Achika-dono," Washu said softly, pushing the boy's shoulder. She smiled at Tenchi. "Achika-dono, welcome."

The boy bowed politely, took Achika's hand, and led her back to the mats.

"You came..." Tenchi was choked up.

"It's alright, Tenchi. I know. We only just saw each other recently, after all." Achika smiled, looking exactly as she always had.

Back in the kitchen, George finished tying the cloth around the three-tiered lunch boxes. He paused for a few seconds, as if searching his memory, then left the boxes and entered the lab. On the floor where Washu had been sitting, sparkly crystals lay scattered. George carefully picked one up and set it in the analyzer.

[KIRARA VIRUS] Data began to flow across the display. *A lifeform that parasites sub-matter constituting higher dimensions. In normal dimensions, it exists as needle-like crystals only in specific regions. When infected, it causes various changes in the intellectual activity area, temporarily inducing*

hallucinations, wish-fulfillment, and euphoria. It can be lethal; there are cases where entire crews of spaceships have died of exhaustion after infection.

There was no mention of a cure. George accessed the microbial research department of the Galaxy Academy and the Galaxy Police Medical Center, but found no satisfactory answers. Symptoms varied wildly by race and individual; it wasn't clear what determined life or death, even for Jurai natives.

George stood before the display for several seconds, thinking. The fact that he could see the boy and Seiran meant he was infected too. Washu had said it was fine, but her judgment might be compromised. Even if he was a robot, his Master and Princess Sasami were in danger. He should contact the authorities. But...

George took his ansible terminal and left the lab. If any truly dangerous signs appeared, he would call for help immediately.

Peaceful laughter echoed from beneath the clouds of cherry blossoms. Everyone was sitting in a circle, cups in hand. "Sorry I'm late," George said, kneeling to unpack the lunch boxes. He laid out the *temarizushi*, thick omelets, teriyaki chicken, simmered vegetables, and strawberries.

"Wow!" Sasami beamed and smiled at the girl next to her—a long-haired girl in a neat dress. "Here you go, Ghost Mirei-chan."[1]

"I told you, I'm not a ghost!" Apparently, another guest had arrived.

Achika sat talking with Ayeka, who was blushing a cherry-blossom pink. Seiran was halfway through a story of his pirate days, while Ryoko chimed in with "Yeah, that's right!" and "He was such an idiot!" Tenchi listened to them, smiling.

"Master?" George gripped the ansible in his pocket.

"Don't be a killjoy," Washu said, her eyes full of amusement. "You won't find anything by looking at the database." So, Washu had expected everything.

"...Yes, Master." George pulled his hand from his pocket and sat down.

"Here, George-san. Good job today." Sasami offered him a cup of top-grade sake. George, whose five senses were as sharp as any living being's thanks to

---

[1] This is the ghost girl Mirei from Tenchi Universe?!

Washu’s "little extras," gratefully accepted. As the crisp aroma filled his mouth, he felt a sense of enjoyment for this "emergency."

"More guests are coming. I'm glad we made so much food." As if prompted by Washu’s words, Katsuhito appeared, walking down the stone steps. "Oh, what magnificent blossoms." He sat next to Tenchi, completely unfazed by the unknown guests.

"Grandpa..." Tenchi looked back and forth between his grandfather and his mother.

"Father, we met in a dream the night before last, didn't we?" Achika bowed slightly.

"Mm." Katsuhito nodded happily. "You came to see the cherry blossoms too? Good, good. Stay as long as you like."

"Father, where is Nobuyuki-san?"

"He’ll be here soon. He’s not the type to miss a picnic." Tenchi set his cup down, relieved. *Everything is going to be okay.*

"Sasami-chan, let’s go for a walk! Show us around!" Mirei stood up, and Tau followed.

"Can I go too, Mama?"

"Of course. You three have fun." The children ran off under the blossoms, laughing.

"It’s so strange... we shouldn't be able to meet and talk like this... I wonder why..." Ayeka mused.

"Ayeka, you just haven't had enough to drink. No fighting today. I'll pour you a cup, so be grateful and drink up."

"If you pour that much, I’ll get drunk!" Ayeka looked to Tenchi for help. "Lord Tenchi, please help me with half of this."

"Young people get along so well," Achika noted, winking at Katsuhito. "Father, in Jurai, one can take two wives, can't they? Do you want to hear about the future?"

"Now, Achika, that’s a story for later. If I hear it now, I’ll have nothing to look forward to."

"Oh, why not? Let me hear it too." A young woman with her hair tied up in an old-fashioned style appeared behind Katsuhito. "Achika-chan, it's true what they say about the beautiful dying young."

"Oh, Mother!?"

Down at the deserted Masaki house, Mihoshi and Kiyone had arrived and found Ryo-Ohki napping on the porch. "Ryo-chan, you're all alone? Where's Sasami-chan?"

"Strange. I wonder where everyone went?"

"Myan." Ryo-Ohki woke up and gave a big yawn. "Myan? Mya-myaa, myan."

"Eh?" Mihoshi tilted her head. "Kiyo-chan, I always wish I could understand what Ryo-Ohki is saying."

Just then, Nobuyuki arrived in his car. "Oh, hello. Do you know where everyone went?"

"We just got here ourselves."

"Maybe they went flower viewing?"

"Myan!" Ryo-Ohki saw Nobuyuki and trotted toward the path. The three of them followed her.

Soon, they heard singing and rhythmic clapping from under the trees. "That's Ryoko-san's voice! It *is* a picnic!"

The party was in full swing. Ayeka sat with a noble-looking old woman in Juraian attire; Sasami was laughing with a boy and a girl. Ryoko sat with the handsome blue-eyed youth, and Katsuhito sat with the young woman and another woman in a light blue kimono—his late wife.

"Achika...!? Achika!!" Nobuyuki nearly tripped into the party.

"Darling!" His wife turned around.

"Achika... you came back?"

"I came to see the cherry blossoms." Nobuyuki hugged her, touching his fingers to her blossom-pink cheek. Tears fell, wetting her face.

"You still have my picture displayed, don't you?"

"Yeah... I look at it every day."

"You haven't changed at all."

"I’m over forty now."

"You’ve raised Tenchi so well."

Mihoshi and Kiyone were too shocked for words, staring at the miracle before them.

"Don't just stand there, join in!" the drunken Ryoko bellowed. Cups were passed, sake was poured, and food was shared with the newcomers.

"Is this Washu-san’s magic?"

"The Kirara Effect!"

"My mama is a genius!"

The air was filled with sparkling words and laughter. "I’m happy to meet you," Seiran said, topping off Mihoshi’s cup.

"Oh, Mr. Pirate! I thought I’d never see you again!" Mihoshi teared up. "I thought you’d become a star in the sky."

"I’m actually quite close by. But I can't let you arrest me anymore."

"You can take him if you want," Ryoko joked.

"Excuse me. May I have a cup as well?" A sharp-eyed man with silver hair tied back appeared behind Washu.

"Kagato!?" Tenchi gasped, nearly standing up.

"Ugh. You didn't have to come," Washu said unenthusiastically, though she still poured him a drink.

"What a waste. In such a peaceful place, the Master Key has no use. By the way, boy, do you know anything about higher-dimensional beings?" Kagato began lecturing Tenchi on sub-matter.

The spring day slowly faded, and the wind began to feel cool. A single petal fell. With the next breeze, more blossoms lost their color and drifted from the branches. Like snow, they fell onto the grass and into the cups.

"The cherry blossoms..." Kiyone noticed two petals landing in her hair like butterflies.

"Well, it's time to head home," Washu said, hugging Tau and stroding his hair lovingly. The light still lingered on the "floating island" of mats, but the sun had set and darkness was closing in.

"Let’s meet again."

"Until the next banquet."

"When the blossoms bloom."

The guests exchanged farewells, and many hands helped clean up. As the mats were folded, the last traces of light melted into the dusk, leaving only the Masaki family in the clearing.

"Shall we go?" Nobuyuki placed a hand on Tenchi’s shoulder as the boy stared at the sky. "We'll see them again. When the seasons turn..."

"Yeah." Tenchi nodded and started walking.

"Tenchi!" "Lord Tenchi!" "Tenchi-niichan!" His future bride candidates chased after him, fighting over who got to carry his bags and ruining the sentimental mood.

"Master, actually..." George whispered to Washu, who was standing alone with some empty bottles. "You said it was lethal?"

Washu turned back, her genius-scientist face fully restored. "I had the spiritual power of this land and the cherry blossoms take the burden for us. Look."

The blossoms had almost entirely fallen, leaving a white carpet at their feet. "In a week, it’ll be back to normal."

When George returned the following week, the petals had been blown away, and the trees were covered in beautiful, vibrant green leaves.

Diary Entry:April 7 – Sunny

Today Sasami is very, very happy!

Because I got to see Mirei-chan!

I thought I'd never see her again, and I cried so much back then...

Meeting Mirei-chan is a secret from Tenchi-niichan and the others.

Everyone thinks Sasami just got lost on the Ghost Ship.

That's why I'm just so glad... Kirara-Virus-san, thank you so much!

Washu-chan really is a genius.

Ah, that's it. Washu-chan wanted to see that girl too.

...Thinking about all these things, I can't seem to write anymore.

Goodnight, Mirei-chan.

Goodnight, Tau-kun.

Goodnight, Achika-san...

CONVENIENCE WARS

Ryoko, a former space pirate and current resident of Okayama Prefecture with an estimated age of 717, was padding stealthily down the hallway of the Masaki household while everyone was fast asleep.

Her destination: the kitchen.

Just like in those convenience store commercials, she had been hit by a sudden late-night craving for ice cream.

"Vanilla? Strawberry? Cookies and Cream? Choco Chip?"

Chanting like it was a magic spell, she peeked into the kitchen to find a pale blue light leaking from the refrigerator. The moment she noticed it, the light vanished with a *thud*, and she saw a black, specter-like shadow scurry toward the cupboards.

Ryoko snapped on the light.

"I saw you~"

The female specter in pajamas, with two long black tails of hair trailing behind her, spun around clutching a 760ml tub of strawberry ice cream.

"What!?"

Though she was originally from the planet Jurai—an exalted princess back in her home country—the current Ayeka was nothing more than a glutton.

> **[The Specter: Ice Cream Licker]**
>
> A female spirit rumored to haunt the Masaki household. She appears in the deserted kitchen at midnight and surreptitiously reduces the supply of ice cream. When the lights are turned on, she retreats in shame.

The "Ice Cream Licker" did not retreat.

"I’m not giving you any! There’s hardly any left!"

Ryoko strode up to Ayeka and snatched the tub away without a word. She realized just now that she *did* want strawberry.

"You're gonna get fat. Tenchi's gonna hate you. Tomorrow morning, I'm gonna tell everyone. Are you sure you're okay with that?"

Ayeka trembled, clutching her spoon, but suddenly slammed it onto the table.

"Meanie! You'll regret this!"

The specter, having lost her power, pattered away in a run.

Ryoko smirked, picked up the spoon, and began licking the ice cream. There are folk tales about "monster cats" that trip out by licking oil from lamps, but the monsters of the Masaki house trip out on ice cream.

"Aaaah... This isn't nearly enough."

As she tripped out, a shining palace of numbers appeared in Ryoko's mind. A magical shop where everything was in stock and everything was obtainable.

"Man, I wish Kiyone's convenience store was next door."

Kiyone Makibi, a First-Class Detective who had moved out of the Masaki house to live in a boarding house with her partner Mihoshi, was supposed to be working part-time at a Seven-Eleven. Just for the record, their actual employer was the Galaxy Police.

With Ryoko's special abilities—teleportation and phasing through walls—pulling off a convenience store raid would be a piece of cake. However, rumors would spread instantly at the local shops, so she couldn't actually do it. If word reached Tenchi, he'd know the culprit immediately.

The motto of Tenchi Masaki (17), the only son and heir of the household, was "Don't cause trouble for others," followed by "Live a peaceful life." Thanks to these mottos, the four aliens and one creature living in the house managed to get by without clashing with the local village society.

Ryoko opened the fridge and finished off the half-empty tubs of vanilla, choco chip, and cookies and cream in the blink of an eye. She shoved the empty cups back into the freezer as they were and licked her lips with satisfaction. Then, she floated up into the air and retreated to her hiding spot built upon the ceiling beams.

The crimes were exposed the following day.

"My word! There is absolutely no ice cream left!"

Ayeka raised her voice in an affected manner, pulling the empty tubs out of the freezer and stacking them on the table.

"I wonder who could have eaten it all!? Honestly, Sasami, don't you think it’s strange?"

Everyone in the living room turned their gaze toward Ryoko.

"Ryoko-oneechan!?"

The little goddess of the kitchen glared at Ryoko reproachfully.

"Ryoko, was it you?" Tenchi sighed. "Fine, then. No ice cream until next week."

The Masaki family went out once a week to buy groceries in bulk.

"No, the person who ate it should take responsibility. Don't you think so, Lord Tenchi?" Ayeka glanced at Ryoko triumphantly and sneered.

"Ugh..." Ryoko groaned, stuck for words.

It hadn't taken even five seconds for the culprit to be identified. It was too late now to scream, "It wasn't me!" Ayeka must have stayed up all night thinking of a way to retaliate.

Just then, Tenchi cut in.

"Absolutely not!!"

His face was visibly pale.

"Please don't corner Ryoko by making her 'take responsibility'! We can get by without ice cream, right? Ayeka-san, do you know what Ryoko is thinking right now? Look at her face—that’s the face of someone who’s about to break into a local convenience store and plunder the ice cream. Please, both of you, don't cause trouble! If you do, we won't be able to live here anymore!"

Tenchi looked at Ryoko, then Ayeka, then Ryo-Ohki sitting on Sasami's head, and finally at the genius scientist (Washu) who was in the kitchen (pretending) to read the newspaper.

"Listen. Don't forget that the moment you take a single step outside this house, you are supposed to be 'Ordinary Earthlings.' I’m counting on you."

Tenchi looked back over his shoulder repeatedly as he left the room. It had been a secret for a long time, but this was the reason the Masaki family rarely went out and lived a self-sufficient lifestyle.

The aliens left in the living room looked at each other awkwardly.

"There, you see? Because your daily behavior is so poor, I ended up getting scolded too. Do be careful!"

"What was that!?"

The blood rushed to Ryoko’s head.

"You were the one sneaking around the kitchen too! Why am I always the only one who gets yelled at? So what if I ate a cup or two or three or four? It’s not like I ate them all! They were only half-full anyway. If I was gonna get lectured by you with that 'know-it-all' face, I should’ve just eaten the whole lot from the start!"

"What!? If you’re in the wrong, you should just apologize! A 'stray cat' thief like you is a disgrace to the Masaki family! If you keep acting like this, you’ll be kicked out before long!"

Ayeka, still frustrated from the night before, pressed her point, even though it was slightly off from what Tenchi had actually meant.

"In any case, what do you even *do* all day!? Are you useful for anything? Have you ever worked for the Masaki family, cleaned, or made a meal? They say 'He who does not work, shall not eat.' Compared to us, who properly handle the household chores on a rotation, you are lower than a cockroach! No, given how much you eat, perhaps you're a giant cockroach! To act so selfishly on top of that is unforgivable! You're a tick! A tapeworm! A nuisance to the Masaki house!"

Ryoko’s eyes went wide at the sheer verbal abuse; her mind momentarily short-circuited. Then, her emergency (instinctual) circuits from her pirate days flickered to life, and a surge of adrenaline flooded in.

"Oh, is that so? I get it now."

Her hair stood on end, her eyes sharpened into golden slits, and an aura of rage flickered around her body.

"Basically, you're saying I'm in the way, right? Fine. I'll leave, just like you want."

"Onee-chan!!" Sasami was genuinely shocked, nearly dropping Ryo-Ohki. "No! Don't say you're leaving! I'll go buy you some ice cream, so... I'm sure Sis didn't mean it, right?"

"Myaaaaann..." Ryo-Ohki mewled fearfully atop her head.

"Ryo-Ohki. You stay. Let Sasami take care of you."

Ryoko's suppressed voice was quite eerie.

"Hmph!" Ayeka turned her head away. "If you think I'm going to stop you, you are making a 'Big Mistake.' This is a good opportunity for you to become serious, following Kiyone-san's example."

Ryoko's eyes, already naturally sharp, slanted up even further.

"Yeah, I'll do just that. Catch ya later!"

As soon as she spoke, Ryoko vanished.

"Ryoko-oneechan!?"

Sasami stared blankly at the empty space where dark clouds seemed to linger. This was different... this wasn't the usual Ryoko-oneechan.

"Washu-chan! Ryoko-oneechan ran away from home!"

"Hmm..." Washu peeked out from behind her newspaper screen. Her eyes were sparkling with amusement.

"If she comes back today, it's not running away. If she doesn't come back, then it is. It's what you'd call an 'uncertain factor.'"

Leaving behind a smirk, Washu retreated to her laboratory.

"Hmph...! She'll come back soon enough once she gets hungry."

"Myaaaaann...?"

Sasami instinctively hugged Ryo-Ohki tight, watching her sister walk out of the room with her two tails trailing behind.

"Ryoko-oneechan... she'll come back, right?"

But that night, Ryoko really did not come back.

"That will be 976 yen. Out of 1000, thank you."

Kiyone handed 24 yen in change and a receipt to a college-aged man and smiled brightly.

"Thank you very much!"

It was a smile far too high-quality for a plain convenience store jacket. The man blushed and hurried out of the shop.

"You were late today," the kind-looking middle-aged manager smiled. The laugh lines at the corners of his eyes crinkled. "Lots of customers come just to see you. Were you aiming for a time when it’s less crowded?"

"It’s not like that," Kiyone began checking the order forms.

It had been a month since she started working part-time at this small convenience store, and her days had been reasonably peaceful.

The store’s name was "Three Stars."

The manager’s name was Yujiro Hoshiura.

Though it was called a convenience store, it was originally a liquor store that had been renovated to look like a convenience store to keep up with the times. Kiyone liked this little shop run by a husband and wife. She wanted to work here for a long time. That was why she hadn't told anyone about this place, except for Mihoshi. Even if it was just a temporary life on Earth, she wanted to put an end to her wandering part-time life.

However, the day arrived to crush those modest hopes to pieces.

It was a night in May, known in this country as Children's Day.

"Found ya at last."

Ryoko wore a sinister grin, clutching a pitiful victim under her arm.

"If you changed jobs, you could've just told me."

"Ryoko-san!?" Kiyone reflexively braced herself.

This was the root of all evil—the cause of Kiyone's wandering life, the terrifying parasite who sabotaged her work and destroyed her economic activities wherever she went.

"Kiyo-chan, I'm sorrrryyyyy..." Mihoshi, held firmly by Ryoko, pressed her hands together in apology.

"Whatever. I'll be in your care for a while."

Ryoko tossed Mihoshi aside, grabbed a basket, and started circling the store.

"I missed lunch and dinner because of you."

Ryoko piled up boxed lunches until the basket was full, then opened the wrappers right there and started eating ravenously.

"Wait, Ryoko-san!?"

"Shut up!" came a very concise reply. "I'm a little on edge right now. If you get in my way, I'll blow the whole store away with a shockwave."

Horrified, Kiyone turned back to Mihoshi. Mihoshi shook her head vigorously and signaled: *(Call the Masaki house?)*

"Ryoko-san, come over here for a second. I'll give you the lunches, just go in the back... Mihoshi, take the register!"

Kiyone quickly grabbed the basket, pulled Ryoko by the sleeve, and led her into the store's warehouse. The manager was in the middle of checking inventory there.

"Who are you!?"

"Ah, sorry Manager, this person is my friend and—"

Ryoko interrupted before she could finish.

"You're the manager? From now on, this store belongs to me!!"

Ryoko held the chopsticks and the lunch box together in her left hand and smoothly drew her Aura Blade. The manager’s jaw dropped, and his checklist fell to the floor.

"The lunches at your place are actually pretty good."

Ryoko sat cross-legged on a cardboard box, reading a magazine and happily drinking a can of beer.

"I like it here. I won't get in the way of business, so go ahead and make lots of money. I wouldn't even mind watching the counter for you."

"Young lady..." The manager, sitting on a beer crate, stared fearfully at the Aura Blade resting on Ryoko’s lap. "I don't know what the circumstances are, but we close at 11 PM..."

"Oh, go ahead and go home whenever you like. I can sleep anywhere."

"That’s not the point!"

Kiyone, unable to take it anymore, interjected.

"What on earth is going on!? Do you think you'll get away with this for free?"

"Shut it, will you?"

Ryoko crushed the beer can with one hand. The manager’s eyes nearly popped out as he watched the empty can crumple like scrap paper in her hand.

"I said I won't get in the way, so it’s fine. If you keep whining, I'll fold the lot of you up."

The Aura Blade rose slightly and was pointed right at Kiyone's nose.

"No violence! No violence!" The manager jumped up. "I just renovated! I have twenty years left on the loan! My wife is waiting at home, and my son is coming back tomorrow. What are you!? Just barging into someone's store..."

"You seem to be a slow learner."

Ryoko stood up and narrowed her eyes. The Aura Blade flashed. In an instant, the steel shelves were sliced in half, and plastic bottles and cans came tumbling down. There was a tremendous crash.

"Kiyone! What happened!?"

Mihoshi, who had been making her third call to the Masaki house, came rushing in.

"Ah-hah-hah-hah-hah!!"

In the warehouse, the manager was pale and Kiyone was frozen, white as a sheet.

"My name is Ryoko. Remember it!"

A message began playing from the discarded telephone receiver.

"The Masaki household is currently unavailable. Please leave a message after the beep..."

It was the next morning.

Tenchi, going to get the newspaper, noticed the telephone cord disappearing into the shoe cupboard. Pulling it out with a tilted head, he saw the answering machine lamp blinking away.

"Hello? It's a disasterrrr. Ryoko-san came to the shop and she's threatening Kiyone. What happened? Anyway, please callll..."

May 5, 11:12 PM. One message, the machine followed up.

"Hey, hey, is everyone asleep? I'm telling you, it's a disaster! Ryoko-san's eyes look weird... Oh... oh dear, a customer!"

May 5, 11:16 PM. Two messages.

"....."

Two minutes later, the third message had no words, only the sound of something being overturned.

"Tenchi-san! Ryoko-san is staying at the shop. At this rate, she's going to take it over! We can't go home. What should we do..."

May 6, 12:08 AM. Four messages.

There were five more calls. By the sixth call, there were sounds of crying. The ninth call was at 3:14 AM.

"You don't have to come anymore... because Ryoko-san got drunk and fell asleep... Please, please call me when it's morning."

The blood drained from Tenchi’s face. He knew immediately who the caller was, but the most important details—the name of the store and the phone number—hadn't been mentioned once.

"This is bad!" Tenchi rushed into the living room.

In the Japanese-style room connected to the living room, Nobuyuki, Katsuhito, Ayeka, and Washu were sitting around the low table waiting for breakfast.

"Does anyone know where Kiyone-san works?"

"Wasn't it Daiei?"

"It was McDonald's."

"Dad, that was a long time ago."

"It's a Seven-Eleven."

Sasami peeked out from the kitchen. "Could it be Ryoko-oneechan...?"

"Mihoshi-san left a message. It sounds like Ryoko barged in on Kiyone."

Ayeka’s eyes went wide.

"Who was the one who set the machine to record and shoved it in the shoe cupboard?"

"I know absolutely nothing about that!"

Suddenly the target of a barrage of glares, Ayeka hung her head, turning bright red.

"Well, I just had a bad feeling..."

"Aaaaah... that was a good sleep."

Ryoko, who had been snoring in a nest made of packing materials and cardboard, kicked over a sake bottle and peered outside. The store was open, and the day had long since begun.

At the register was Kiyone, with dark circles under her eyes, and the manager was organizing the bento and sandwich shelves with bloodshot eyes.

"Mornin'!"

Ryoko stepped out into the store in a good mood and swiped three sandwiches.

"Hey, wait—"

Immediately, their eyes locked.

"Did you say something?"

A customer in the shop turned around curiously. Feeling the customer’s gaze, the manager hunched his shoulders and whispered quickly to Ryoko.

"Please, just go in the back! It looks weird if someone's eating the merchandise in the middle of the store."

"Thanks."

Ryoko smiled, swiped an orange juice, blew a kiss to the manager, and vanished into the back.

"They're late. Hasn't Tenchi-san listened to the messages?"

Kiyone stood at the register, feeling irritated. She hadn't slept a wink. The manager hadn't gone home. Mihoshi had cried while calling nine times, but apparently, none of them went through.

Suddenly, a bad premonition hit her.

"Hey, Mihoshi."

Mihoshi, who had been wandering around with a rag, turned around.

"Did you leave the name or the phone number of this place?"

Mihoshi’s eyes went wide as she chewed on the question for a moment, then she turned red as a ripe tomato.

"I don't think I said it..."

"Then there's no way he's gonna call!"

Kiyone picked up the receiver in a huff. Suddenly, a hand reached out and cut the line.

"Who were you planning to call? Private calls are no good."

Ryoko had apparently been listening.

"Ryoko-san! If you don't cut it out, I'm going to get angry too."

Kiyone glanced at her partner and shouted: "Go, Mihoshi! Fast! Run!"

"Y-yes!"

Mihoshi took off running while still holding the rag, knocking over a customer who was just about to enter the store.

The First-Class Detective of the Galaxy Police and the former space pirate glared at each other over the phone.

"I'm going to take you back to the Masaki house even if I have to put a rope around your neck."

"Try it if you can."

"What you're doing is a crime!"

"Go ahead and call the cops or whoever."

Kiyone bit her lip. The moment the police reached the store, Ryoko would vanish like smoke. All that would be left is a mountain of damage, and I'd be fired. Kiyone regretted leaving her blaster at the boarding house. If she was going to get fired anyway, it wouldn't be too late to get fired after settling the grudge.

"Excuse me."

A middle-aged woman, looking like a local housewife, set a basket down on the counter with a *thud*.

"What do you want, hag?"

Ryoko turned around with a grumpy face and shoved the basket back.

"If you want this, leave a million yen!"

The woman's eyes went wide, and she stood like a guardian statue.

"Ah... sorry, she's just joking!"

Kiyone turned pale and pushed Ryoko away. "I'm so sorry. Let's see... that will be 1,432 yen."

"Forget it!" The woman stormed out of the shop.

The manager had been standing there watching the whole scene, but suddenly he dashed forward and grabbed Ryoko's arm.

"You! I'll give you whatever you want, just get out of here. If you do things like that, customers will stop coming. Kiyone-kun, I'm sorry, but you too."

"Manager..." Kiyone went blank for a second. Fired again... It had only been a month since she was fired from Seven-Eleven, making this the seventh time in total... At this rate, she wouldn't even be able to pay the rent, let alone find another shop that would hire her.

"Fine then, give me the whole store. If you do, I'll leave."

"What are you talking about!? There's no way I can give you the store!"

"I'm telling you I'm trying to settle this peacefully. Do you really want to make me angry that much?"

Just then, the phone rang.

"It's Tenchi-san!"

Kiyone snapped out of it and picked up the receiver. This time, it seemed Mihoshi had handled it well.

"Hello, Three Stars? This is the police. An employee of yours named Mihoshi..."

"The police!?"

While Kiyone was speechless, the manager snatched the receiver.

"Help me! A robber is staying in the shop. Anyway, please come immediately!"

The call was cut short. Ryoko had ripped the phone cord out.

"You really seem determined to make me angry."

Kiyone felt dizzy and instinctively leaned on the register. That airheaded partner of hers, instead of going to the Masaki house, had run straight to the police.

Ten minutes later, three officers arrived.

"Where is the robber?"

"At the register..."

Ryoko had vanished into thin air.

"Huh?"

The officers walked around the store, searching every corner of the warehouse, but no suspicious person was found.

"What's going on, Mr. Hoshiura? What’s the damage?"

The very person who had brought the police suddenly awoke to her professional consciousness and began explaining emphatically to a young patrolman.

"Listen, she's not someone you can handle easily! She's definitely still in the shop. After all, she can phase through walls. She might be hiding in the ceiling!"

"In the ceiling?"

The serious-looking patrolman looked up at the ceiling anxiously. Just then, something round like a cabbage hit his leg. Startled, he looked down to see a human head sticking out of the linoleum floor.

"That hurts~"

"Yikes!"

At that voice, the manager and the sergeant came running. Ryoko’s head rolled its eyes, cackled, and vanished.

"A-a head..."

"Get out~ Get out of this store~"

Suddenly, a voice like someone being strangled echoed from the speakers, and cans came rolling off the shelves.

"I'm not giving it up~ This store belongs to me."

Toothpaste boxes and magazines flew through the air, and the lights flickered on and off.

"P... Poltergeist!?"

The young patrolman, who was actually an occult enthusiast, looked up fearfully and exchanged glances with the sergeant.

"No! It's an evil spirit! If we stay here, we'll be cursed to death. It's beyond us. Call the riot squad..."

"Don't be stupid! There's no such thing!"

Right in front of the sergeant's eyes, a pair of scissors for sale burst through their packaging and flew straight toward the space between his eyebrows.

"Eep!" The sergeant instinctively ducked.

Then, something cold began dripping from the ceiling. He looked up reflexively to see a woman's head hanging upside down, with a blood-like liquid trickling from her mouth.

"Get... out..."

The head with its hair standing on end spat the liquid like someone possessed. The smell of wine wafted up.

"Gyaaaaaah!"

The young patrolman leaped up and ran out of the shop in an instant.

"Wait, Officer!"

"Stop with the pranks. If you do this again, I'll suspend your business license."

The sergeant shook off the manager's hand and followed his subordinate out of the shop.

"Wow, that was surprising."

Another patrolman, who seemed to have been hiding somewhere during the commotion, whispered to the manager.

"I'm sorry, but you'd be better off asking for an exorcism than the police. I know someone my grandmother knows; why don't you try calling here?"

The patrolman scribbled on a notepad and handed it to the manager. On the slip of paper was written "Masaki Shrine" and its phone number. The manager swallowed hard and ran out of the shop in search of a public phone.

The phone at the Masaki Shrine office rang immediately after.

Katsuhito accepted the request, got ready, and headed down the mountain path, sliding open the front door of the Masaki house.

"Tenchi! They say a monster is running wild at a convenience store."

Tenchi and the others, who were clustered at the entrance flipping through the phone book, looked up at his grandfather's face in shock.

"What are you waiting for? Let's go!"

"Gramps, a monster? You don't mean..."

"They say it's a heinous monster with messy light-blue hair, appearing from floors and ceilings, with slanted golden eyes, spitting liquid."

"Yikes..."

Tenchi, who had started to stand up, lost the strength in his legs. He knew it wouldn't end well, but he hadn't expected it to turn into something like a horror movie...

"Which convenience store?"

"I wonder how much her brain has rotted, that woman!"

"Lady Ayeka, this has turned into quite an ordeal, hasn't it?"

"Myaaaaann...?"

"Call a taxi."

Katsuhito calmed the women, who were all saying whatever they pleased, and solemnly issued his command.

Meanwhile, at "Three Stars" (formerly Hoshiura Liquor), the convenience store loved by the locals, manager Yujiro Hoshiura was sitting on the floor, staring blankly into space.

"How could you do this! Hey, Ryoko-san! Come down here!"

"No way. You went and called the cops, and I like this store! I'm staying here out of spite."

"If you're floating in the air like that, no customers will come! If customers don't come, the store will go under. Look, the store is a mess. If you like this place so much, why don't you help clean up?"

"Shut up! I didn't throw anything that would break. If you put them back on the shelves, they'll be as good as new."

The part-timer and the monster were shouting at each other in front of the freezer case. Moreover, one was floating in mid-air, sitting cross-legged, scooping up Haagen-Dazs strawberry ice cream with her finger and licking it.

"U-um... excuse me. Please stay strong, okay? Ryoko and Kiyone aren't usually that extreme... I'm sure something must have happened."

"Was it Mihoshi-san?" The manager turned a hollow gaze. "What is that thing? Why is it floating in the air? Why did it come to my store?"

"Well, Ryoko-san is a former space pirate, and Kiyone is a First-Class Detective. It's a se-cret! ♡"

Mihoshi smiled brightly and stood up to wring out her rag.

"Space pirate? First-Class Detective??"

Yujiro Hoshiura's internal universe was just a step away from collapsing.

"What's going on, old man?"

A blonde, long-haired heavy metal youth leaned over and peeked in.

"Satoru!?"

"I tried calling and it wouldn't go through, so I came to check, and what a mess! Did robbers come?"

"Sato-ruuu!" Yujiro instinctively clung to his son's platform boots. "Don't come in! Leave this place immediately. This store is possessed by a terrifying monster. It's a female monster that flies through the air and phases through walls. I've never had such a terrifying experience in my life."

"Monster!?" The heavy metal youth looked around the shop. His gaze met the two women looking back curiously from in front of the freezer case. One was a black-haired woman in a tacky convenience store jacket, and the other was a woman of unknown nationality with messy light-blue hair, wearing a striped long dress.

"What a radical woman..." Satoru Hoshiura murmured with admiration. She was a fine woman, the kind you rarely see even in Tokyo.

"Hey, what's your name? Want to join our band?"

"Who the hell are you!?" Ryoko wrinkled her nose and glared at Satoru. She was a woman born to insult and fire up the crowd from the stage.

"What a damn tacky outfit."

In that instant, the fire of love was lit in Satoru Hoshiura's chest.

"Which one is Mr. Yujiro Hoshiura?"

An old man in Shinto priest robes and three others got out of a taxi.

"Tenchi-san!?"

"Shh." Tenchi signaled to Kiyone and Mihoshi, putting a finger to his lips and whispering. "We're supposed to be doing an exorcism."

"You're Mr. Katsuhito Masaki, right? We've been waiting for you. Please, we're in your hands." The manager bowed repeatedly with a face like he was about to cry.

"And those young people with you?"

"This is my grandson Tenchi, and these two are spirit-medium sisters."

"Pleased to meet you." Tenchi, Ayeka, and Sasami bowed politely.

"They said the monster's name was Ryoko? That is a Great Monster that has lived for seven hundred years. Actually, we had her sealed at the Masaki Shrine, but she recently broke the seal. My grandson has been suffering quite a lot because of her."

"I see... so that's how it was." The manager nodded deeply as if finding a ray of light.

"Don't worry. Now that I'm here, it will be fine."

Katsuhito, followed by Tenchi and the others, marched through the store with a solemn face and stopped right in front of Satoru Hoshiura and Ryoko. Satoru was still in the middle of hitting on Ryoko.

"Young man, you are possessed by an evil aura. That woman is indeed the Great Monster Ryoko. I won't say it's a bad thing, but leave her side immediately. Your life force will be sucked dry in a single night."

"What!?" Ryoko turned around with her eyes slanted. "You old geezer! Don't you go treating me like a monster!"

"Evil spirit, begone! Evil spirit, begone!" Ayeka waved her purification wand with dramatic actions. "You hateful Great Monster who disturbs the peace and possesses innocent people to do evil! I, the beautiful exorcist Ayeka-sama, shall drive you away! Honestly, Ryoko-san, stop doing stupid things and go home already!"

"Who's a 'beautiful exorcist'?" Ryoko’s body floated up gently. "Don't give me that! You're the one who told me to get out, so I got out. It's too late to tell me to come back now. If you really want me to return, you'll have to strip naked and do a kowtow. What'll it be?"

"Strip naked and kowtow to you!? Did you drop your brain somewhere!?"

Tenchi and Katsuhito exchanged glances behind Ayeka.

"I thought it might be something like that..."

"I don't know anything about it. Tenchi, you do something."

"Gramps..."

Swallowing the complaint of "Then what did we even come here for?", Tenchi spoke to the nearby heavy metal youth for the time being.

"Um, excuse me, but what was Ryoko talking about?"

"Levitation..." Satoru's eyes were glued to the striped dress fluttering in the air. "Amazing... with her, even Budokan isn't a dream... You!!"

"Huh?"

"Can I have her? Even just lending her is fine. Hey, Dad! I'm gonna go grab my guitar." Satoru Hoshiura ran out of the shop.

"'Dad'...!?" Tenchi felt the situation was already twisting like a Klein bottle.

"Hey, Ryoko-oneechan. Let's go home already."

Sasami, who had been placing ultra-compact video cameras (insect-type) hidden in her sleeves all over the store, pulled on Ryoko's dress. "Kiyone-san and the others are in trouble. Sasami will apologize, so let's just go home quietly."

An out-of-season butterfly fluttered in and began circling Ryoko.

"No way. I've already gone back to being a pirate. To start with, I'm going to conquer this convenience store and eventually build Ryoko-sama's great kingdom."

Ryoko swatted the butterfly.

"Whoops..." Washu, who was watching the monitor with George in the Masaki lab, instinctively pulled back. "Did she notice?"

Ryoko looked closely at the remains of the swatted butterfly, then slanted her eyes and gritted her teeth.

"You're making fun of me, aren't you? Now I'm really mad! Get ready, 'cause I'm gonna fight to the finish!! You too!"

Ryoko took Ayeka's purification wand, snapped it into eight pieces, and threw it on the floor.

"You too!" She teleported and appeared right in front of Kiyone’s nose.

"And you too!!" Ryoko phased through the manager's body and vanished.

Yujiro Hoshiura fainted.

"Ah, Manager!?"

"Let him sleep for a while." Katsuhito nodded to Kiyone. "Yes, that's for the best. Now then..." Katsuhito looked around. "It seems this will take longer than expected. Let's have some tea for now. Hey, Tenchi. Carry the manager over."

Fortunately, there were no customers at the moment.

"That Ryoko..." Tenchi, Mihoshi, and Kiyone—all three of them—carried the fainted manager to the back. A fly crawling on the ceiling recorded the whole sequence and transmitted it to the lab.

"Hmm... I messed up a little. Ryoko’s gone completely stubborn."

"I see..."

Washu was standing in front of the monitor with her arms crossed, but since she was smiling, she didn't look like she was seriously considering a solution.

"It would be solved easily if Ayeka-dono would just apologize."

"I agree," George murmured, but in his heart, he thought if such a thing were possible, all wars would surely disappear from this earth.

"Easier said than done. All right!" Washu stood up. "Time for Washu-chan to step in for the sake of regional peace. George, can you watch the monitor for a bit?"

"Yes, Master." George wisely refrained from asking questions. The Master's word is law and truth. It is the servant's duty to follow her will.

That said, George, who possessed a sophisticated mental structure, was a bit nervous. The speculation of "What is she planning?" slid into the anxiety of "What am I going to be made to do?", and as a result of clashing with his professional ethics that such things shouldn't be thought about, only his emotions were left floating in the air.

"O gods who dwell in this land, save us, purify us, cleanse us," George murmured. It was a mental conditioning keyword he had picked up from the various knowledge he had absorbed since coming to the Masaki house.

On the monitor screen, a few customers were starting to trickle in as lunchtime approached.

"Welcome."

Kiyone returned to the register and welcomed the customers with a forced smile. Now that the manager had fallen, the survival of the store rested on her shoulders.

The vanished Ryoko hasn't shown herself lately; who knows what she's plotting.

In the warehouse, Katsuhito and his "disciples" had sat down wherever they liked and were eating through the Afternoon Tea, ice cream, and Oreo cookies that stick to your teeth, which they had taken from the display cases.

The unconscious manager was laid in the innermost part of the warehouse, propped up in a U-shaped gap made of beer crates. Since it was where Ryoko had originally made her nest, it was a good place to lay him.

"Hey, Sister."

"What is it?"

Even in the dark and narrow warehouse, the "spirit-medium sisters" of Jurai were somehow elegant, as if they were drinking tea in the palace tea room.

"It's already noon. What should Sasami and the others do now?"

"Let's see..." Ayeka mused listlessly. "I'm sure Lord Yosho and Lord Tenchi will manage something. I'm sick of being part of this nonsense. Hey, Sasami. Why don't we go have lunch somewhere and do some shopping?"

"Sister, do you have money?"

"I don't, but I can borrow some from Lord Tenchi."

Ayeka stood up gracefully, leaving half of her Afternoon Tea. "Lord Tenchi?"

She held out her well-maintained white palm. Suddenly, a cockroach fell onto it. It had appeared out of thin air, fifteen centimeters above her palm.

"Eek!"

The cockroach momentarily tilted its body diagonally and stared up at Ayeka's face, then began climbing up her arm at an unbelievable speed.

"Gyaaaaaaaah!"

Letting out a scream that felt like it would pierce through the warehouse walls, Ayeka flailed her arms.

"Excuse me for a moment!" Kiyone abandoned the two customers who had come to buy boxed lunches and started running. "Ayeka-san, what happened!?"

"Co... Cock..."

The cockroach fell to the floor with a *thud* and was waving its legs while upside down, but then it got up and started walking unsteadily. Its hearing seemed to have been destroyed.

Tenchi stood up, Sasami hid behind Katsuhito, and Ayeka pointed at the cockroach while frozen in place.

"Serves you right. Have you learned your lesson?"

Ryoko peeked out from the ceiling.

"Hey, Ayeka! That was just a taste. If you don't get out of here fast, I'll do more. It won't be just cockroaches next time!"

"Ryoko!" Tenchi looked up at the ceiling and shouted.

"Cut it out, already! I told you over and over not to go around causing trouble for people, didn't I? Now, come on down. We're going home. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise what?"

Ryoko leaned out from the ceiling, her interest piqued.

"Otherwise, I'm going to end up hating you."

"Haaaah..."

Kiyone couldn't help but let out a deep sigh. Ultimately, this is how things were. It was probably a mistake to expect anything else.

"You're an idiot, Tenchi. Ayeka is the one who kicked me out. Do you really want me to come back?"

Ryoko did a mid-air flip and landed gracefully right next to Tenchi.

"Of course I do."

"Then kiss me."

Ryoko wrapped her arms around Tenchi's neck and leaned into him.

"Melt my heart. Then I'll think about it. Right, Tenchi?"

"Go for it, girl!"

"Hurry up and do it!"

Kiyone spun around, startled. Behind her, the two customers she had left behind earlier were stretching their necks to peer inside, offering loud cheers and applause.

"Customers!? You can't be in here!"

Kiyone hurriedly closed the door and shooed them away.

"The warehouse is strictly off-limits..."

Suddenly, the door swung open and Ryoko poked her head out.

"Thanks for the business! Come back and see us again at Three Stars, the convenience store with love. Don't be a stranger!"

Ryoko gave a provocative wiggle of her hips, blew the two men a kiss, and vanished from the spot. The two men stood there, wide-eyed.

"That was one sexy ghost."

"I think I'll come back again."

Thinking to themselves how they'd describe this later, the two headed back to the nearby construction site. Inside the warehouse, the commotion had brought Yujiro Hoshiura back to his senses, and he was currently drinking a restorative splash of whiskey.

"I'm finished..."

The good-natured manager sobbed.

"This store is finished, too. After such total chaos, the store's credibility is zero. Mr. Masaki, I appreciate you coming, but that monster is just doing whatever she wants. I've had enough. I'm closing up shop and going on a journey."

"Now, now, Mr. Hoshiura, calm down."

Katsuhito placed a hand on the manager's shoulder.

"I thought it best not to provoke the monster further, as we'd lose everything if she destroyed the store. That monster is difficult to handle; she gives me quite a hard time as well. It's alright; if I can't do it, Tenchi here will find a way. Besides, Mr. Hoshiura, you have a fine son, don't you? You must work hard for the sake of the son who will inherit this place."

"That useless son wouldn't be any help at all."

The manager looked up.

"He talks about making it big in Tokyo or whatever, drifting around, obsessed with bands and rock and other things I don't understand. People call them 'freeters' or 'NEETs' these days, right? He only came home this time to beg for money, I'm sure of it. I just wish he'd become a little more respectable..."

The manager absent-mindedly rolled up a newspaper and crushed a cockroach that had crawled out from a gap in a crate. The cockroach was crushed and stopped moving, scattering tiny, glittering internal mechanisms.

"That's not a bug..."

In Washu's lab, yet another monitor went dark.

"Master, a cockroach-type has been taken out."

George reported toward the ansible.

"Oh, really? I'd better hurry, then."

An answer came back from Washu, who was somewhere in the vast laboratory.

"The genius Washu-chan is going to lose her turn. Hey, George, could you try out this coating for a second?"

George stood up, trembling with dread.

"What is this!?"

The manager picked up the fragments of the cockroach-mech, his voice shaking. It was an incredibly precise micro-camera; the part that served as the eyes was actually a lens.

The words [Space Pirate] and [First-Class Detective], which had just been registered in Yujiro Hoshiura's internal universe, were immediately selected.

"You people are in league with this monster—or space pirate—aren't you? You're all barging in here to take over my store! I won't be fooled anymore! Get out!"

"W-wait... it's not like that."

Tenchi was aghast.

"I'm not a pirate or anything..."

"Silence, alien!"

The manager raised a broom.

"I've seen enough *X-Files* to know. I never thought such a thing would happen to me, but here we are! Now, are you leaving or not? Which is it!?"

"How rude! I am not a pirate! Don't group me with the likes of Ryoko!"

"Sister, it's Sasami's fault. Because Sasami brought the cockroaches..."

"Mr. Hoshiura, this is all a misunderstanding."

Pushed out by the manager, Tenchi and the others passed by Kiyone while arguing and were swept out of the store.

"...What on earth just happened!?"

Kiyone and Mihoshi looked at each other.

"Manager! What's wrong?"

"It's an alien invasion! Kiyone-kun—no, Detective. I'm sorry I didn't believe you. Please, use your power to protect this store!"

"Huh...?"

Kiyone gave Mihoshi a light poke on the head.

"You blabbed about unnecessary things, didn't you!"

Just then, Ryoko appeared.

"See? Just like I said. Manager, you've suddenly become quite reasonable. Don't worry, I'll protect this store for you."

"Space Pirate Monster!!"

The manager gasped and raised his broom. At that moment...

"Sorry I'm late, Dad!"

A motorcycle loaded with amplifiers, cassette decks, and extension cords pulled up in front of the store, and Satoru Hoshiura, with a Fender model slung over his back, came rushing in.

"Ryoko-san, great. Hold this for a second. I'm gonna set things up."

Satoru shoved a microphone into Ryoko's hand and hurriedly paced back and forth, setting up a makeshift stage at the store's entrance.

"Not enough customers. Not enough equipment either, but it can't be helped."

Satoru, who had been busy calling friends and acquaintances, craned his neck to look down the shopping street.

"Well, if I start playing, a crowd will eventually gather. Okay, Ryoko-san, here we go!"

"Hey, Satoru..."

"What is the meaning of this microphone!?"

While Yujiro Hoshiura and Ryoko were shouting, a loud intro started blasting from the speakers.

♪ Hey, baby, don't you cry

I'm actually a really nice guy

They used to call me the Emperor of Hell

But I'm head over heels for your eyes

Ryoko’s eyes slanted sharply. Yujiro Hoshiura backed away behind the register, while Tenchi and the others—who had been kicked out but couldn't exactly go home—stared blankly at the makeshift stage.

♪ Hey, baby, you gotta understand

My heart is non-stop

If you glare at me like that, it'll burst apart

I want you

"This is so tacky!! So tacky!!"

Ryoko yelled into the microphone.

"Looking good, Ryoko-san! Give me more!"

Satoru jumped while holding his guitar, leaning back as he cheered her on.

"So tacky!?"

Outside the store, Tenchi turned red with embarrassment, while the manager felt like he was about to faint behind the register.

♪ Don't make that face, I—

I— wanna— you—

Only you

I— love— you—

"You've got to be joking!!"

Ryoko screamed in a fit of rage.

"I'm gonna rip your heart out and splatter your brains!!"

♪ We'll be together to the bottom of hell

Even as zombies, we'll love each other

I— wanna— you— foreveeeer—

"You be the zombie, you tacky jerk!!"

A crowd had started to gather in front of the store, wondering what the noise was. It was the last holiday of Golden Week. Even a small shopping street had a decent number of people out.

"Oh, Satoru-chan. You're back?"

"Starting something flashy again, aren't we?"

An old man and woman came out of the hardware store next door and gave Satoru a round of applause. As soon as the manager saw this, he crawled under the register.

"Hey, Satoru! I came to see ya. Do your best!"

"Satoru-kun, you were in a band like this? Did you pass the audition yet?"

Old classmates cheered.

"Not yet, but I'm gonna keep at it!"

Satoru waved while holding his pick.

"I can't show my face outside anymore..."

Yujiro Hoshiura held his head in his hands under the register.

"It's over. It's all over."

"My... my head is pounding."

Kiyone, who was gallantly holding the fort at the register, murmured.

"Oh, Satoru-san looks pretty cool, doesn't he? And Ryoko-san seems to have forgotten about the store,"

Mihoshi waved her rag.

"Keep it up, Satoru-san!"

"Thanks, lady! Alright, let's keep it rocking!"

The second song on the demo tape began.

♪ *My car is faster than the wind—*

"Your head is lighter than the wind!!"

Ryoko yelled back. Apparently, in her heated state, she had completely forgotten everything else.

♪ *I'll blast off to the end of the world—*

"I'll blast you to the end of the world!!"

The audience erupted in applause.

"Nice! Do more, girl!"

"I came back to see ya!"

"Make your skirt shorter!"

The men from before, who had abandoned their worksite to rush back, cheered.

"Shut up, you dirty old men!!"

Ryoko stomped her foot and glared in the direction of the voice. In that instant, her dress ripped with a *rrip*, revealing her well-shaped legs.

"Whoa, look at those gams!"

Satoru instinctively looked at Ryoko's legs and turned bright red.

♪ I-I'll take you with me as I fly—

"Don't go turning red on us, kid!"

Another roar of applause broke out. The audience continued to grow; people poked their heads out from the second floors of nearby houses, and bored children came running.

"Tenchi-dono, this has become quite the spectacle."

"W-Washu-san!?"

Having appeared out of nowhere, Washu, accompanied by George, looked around with interest.

"I came thinking I'd restore peace to the area, but it looks like I should change the plan."

"Listening to songs like this once in a while makes me feel young again."

Katsuhito leaned against the display window with his arms folded, tapping his rhythm with his sandals.

"Let's go, George."

George, dressed for hay fever in a trench coat, hat, sunglasses, and mask, silently followed behind Washu.

"It's George-san... right? What's with the outfit?"

"Tenchi-san, please don't ask anything."

Washu walked nonchalantly right up to Ryoko and reached out to snatch the microphone.

"Citizens of the neighborhood, sorry for the noise! Three Stars Convenience Store is currently holding a Golden Week Campaign. Please enjoy this live show to the end, brought to you as a token of our gratitude for your continued patronage."

"Oooooh!" The audience applauded.

"Washu, you..."

"Just do as I say! You're the one who started this. If you get selfish, I'll lock you in the infinite prison."

Washu whispered quickly to Ryoko, then smiled and turned back to the crowd.

"The leader is the one you know, Satoru Hoshiura! On vocals, Invader Ryoko! And here we have Space Sheriff Georgey!"

Washu nudged George with her elbow.

"Hurry! Strip off and look cool!"

"Yes..."

George did as he was told, shedding his coat, removing his hat and mask, and thrusting his arm up in a dramatic pose. His entire body appeared, giving off a smooth metallic luster.

"Whoa, he looks like a Pepsi commercial!"

"It's called liquid metal."

The elementary school kids watching from the very front cheered.

"Actually, this vocalist is a fake who can't sing! She might be a space pirate disguised as a human! Georgey, do your best! Get the space pirate!"

George looked at Washu in confusion. This was not what they had discussed.

"Here I come, space pirate!" Washu whispered under her breath. "Do exactly as we planned. It's just that the special effects shoot has turned into a live show."

"Here I come, space pirate!! I'll test whether you're a real human or not."

George, in desperation, threw a punch.

"What!?"

Ryoko nimbly dodged George's punch and turned back.

"I *am* a real space pirate, but I can sing just fine!!"

Ryoko slammed a roundhouse kick into George's body, and George went flying spectacularly.

"She said she's a space pirate."

"So cheesy~"

The elementary schoolers stood up in excitement.

"Girl, your action moves are cool, too!"

"Whoa, it's a T-back!"

"Oh my, is this some kind of hero show?"

Adults, surrounding the two who were exchanging moves like a fighting game, began cheering for various reasons.

"Amazing... I've never had a crowd this pumped up before."

Satoru Hoshiura raised his voice to keep up, and inside the store, Yujiro Hoshiura crawled out from under the register.

"K-Kiyone-kun... is that person over there also a friend of yours?"

"Well, yes..."

Kiyone had already abandoned any idea of settling the situation.

"I think we just have to let it go as far as it can go. There's no point in stopping it now."

"I suppose so..."

Yujiro stared at the live show unfolding in front of the wide-open door. A female space monster was beating up a robot—or space sheriff.

"Keep it up!! Don't lose!!"

Suddenly, a passionate flame was lit in Yujiro's chest.

"Stand up no matter how unreasonable things get! I'll work hard to protect the store, so you do your best too!"

"Eh?" George looked back.

"Gotcha!!"

Ryoko jumped high and delivered a flying kick to his chest.

"Ah!"

The crowd buzzed. Space Sheriff George fell and didn't get back up.

"This has become quite the turn of events. The space sheriff has been defeated by the space pirate. It seems she has something to say. Invader Ryoko-san, if you please."

Washu offered the microphone to Ryoko, whose eyes were ablaze with anger.

"Don't mess with me!!"

Ryoko screamed.

"As a space pirate, why did you come to this convenience store?"

"I just wanted to eat my fill of ice cream!!"

The audience erupted in laughter.

"And you went and turned it into something ridiculous! Washu, you'll pay for this when we get home!!"

"What! It seems she has a home to go back to!"

Washu leaned back with over-the-top dramatic flair.

"Weren't you supposed to have come from the edge of the universe?"

"Shut up! I belong at the Masaki house—"

Ryoko cut herself off. She had been completely played by Washu.

"Apparently, she came from a housing complex on Planet Masaki. Oh, it looks like our space detective is waking up."

George stood up, rubbing his head.

"My apologies, Invader Ryoko. But do you have Earth money? You can't buy ice cream without money."

"I'll buy ya the ice cream!" someone shouted.

A roar of laughter broke out, followed by a round of applause.

"Thank you. Now, Ryoko-san, before you head back to Planet Masaki, why don't you sing one more song? What’s the track, Satoru-san?"

The tape had already ended during the exchange, so Satoru had to shout the first song title that popped into his head.

"How About a Space Pirate!!"

"And with that... music, start!"

Thunderous applause broke out. After an intro that sounded suspiciously like a famous old hit with a similar title, a heavy metal sound began to blast.

"Oh, what's wrong, Invader Ryoko? Can you not sing after all?"

Ryoko realized she had been perfectly trapped, but she had only two choices: sing or disappear.

"Give me that!"

Ryoko snatched the microphone from the hands of the smirking Washu.

♪ Clean out your ears and listen close

I'm a pirate, the strongest in the universe, Ryoko-sama!

Flying through the sky, passing through walls

A full attack with this sexy body!

"Hell yeah!"

The men cheered, stomping their feet.

♪ Ordinary men aren't even a match

I'm a pirate, the strongest in the universe, Ryoko-sama!

Bashing through, stirring things up

I'll treat you to some bare knuckles!

"That's punk as hell!" Satoru murmured excitedly. "Man, maybe I should quit heavy metal..."

♪ 'Cause I'm a P-I-R-A-T-E

Am I a 'Space Pirate' here?

The Earth and the universe are all mine!

"Yeah~~!" Satoru's classmates chimed in together.

"Nice one, Satoru! Put out a CD!"

"We'll promote it for ya!"

Handclaps started up to fill in for the missing percussion.

♪ Even coming to an Earth convenience store

Was only 'cause I was bored, bored to death!

Get this, get that

All the ice cream I can eat!

Ryoko danced around, thrusting her fist at the customers and making a face while sticking out her tongue. Washu and George stood to the side, smirking and clapping along.

"Gramps, is that... Ryoko?"

Tenchi timidly nudged Katsuhito's arm. He knew Ryoko liked to sing, but he hadn't expected her to be such a hit.

"She has an unexpected talent," Katsuhito nodded contentedly. "If she finds something to enjoy, she might stop being so reckless. Isn't that nice, Tenchi?"

"What a vulgar song!"

Ayeka murmured, grumpy from standing for so long.

"If they had left it to me, I could have given a much more dignified concert!"

"Please, don't..."

Tenchi hurriedly grabbed Ayeka's sleeve.

"Thanks, everyone!!"

Basking in the applause, Ryoko shouted back in a great mood.

"Next stop, Budokan, then the New Year's Special! Even a space pirate is okay for that, right?"

"It's okay!!" the crowd screamed back.

"Then I'll see you all at the next live show! Oh, and by the way, the manager here..."

Completely forgetting she had tried to take over the store, Ryoko pulled out the astonished Yujiro Hoshiura.

"He's a damn good guy. You'll all keep coming back to this shop, won't you?"

"We will!" an old man from the shopping street shouted.

"Ryoko-kun...!?" Yujiro blinked.

"Thank you very much. Since this was an unauthorized live show, we'll wrap things up before the police get mad at us. Well everyone, please continue to support the town's beloved convenience store, Three Stars!"

Washu finished the closing remarks and winked at Mihoshi and Kiyone.

"Thank you very much!"

"Come again!"

Once the customers left and Satoru finished packing the gear, Washu bowed deeply to the manager.

"I'm sorry my daughter caused such a commotion."

"Ah, no, no..." Yujiro hurriedly returned the bow. "Thank you for settling things so smoothly."

"Well then, we shall take our leave."

Washu pulled Ryoko by the ear and signaled to Tenchi.

"We're very sorry."

Tenchi bowed awkwardly and urged Ayeka and the others out of the store.

"Sorry we couldn't be of more help," Katsuhito said, turning back at the entrance.

"Not at all... Hey, Satoru!"

The manager pulled six Haagen-Dazs ice creams from the freezer and shoved them into Satoru's hands.

"Give these to everyone... Hurry, go!"

Startled, Satoru started running.

"Ryoko-san! Everyone!"

Satoru handed Ryoko an armful of ice cream.

"Can I... get your phone number?"

"Your phone line is cut, isn't it?"

"Oh, that's okay. I'm good at fixing that kind of thing." Satoru smiled shyly. "You'll come back, right?"

Ryoko knit her brows and looked up at Satoru, but then suddenly broke into a wide grin.

"As long as you let me eat ice cream."

"Your father knows where our house is. Come by and visit sometime soon."

The Masaki family hailed a taxi and piled in one by one. Satoru watched Ryoko's retreating figure with dreamy eyes, then jumped and shouted:

"It's all-you-can-eat!!"

"You'd better mean it! If you're lying, I'll wreck the place!!"

The jam-packed taxi slowly drove off. When Satoru returned to the shop, Kiyone and Mihoshi greeted him with smiles.

"Good work. We've finished cleaning up the store."

"I'm Mihoshi, the new part-timer!"

"Eh? You too?"

Yujiro patted the confused Satoru on the shoulder.

"I thought I'd have them teach me a few things. Business needs a youthful perspective. I realized that after seeing you guys today. Now then, may business prosper! Let's do our best!"

Mihoshi and Kiyone exchanged a glance, high-fived in Galaxy Police style, and smiled at each other.

"I think... maybe I will take over the shop after all."

Satoru smiled, thinking of Ryoko's legs.

May 6th – Sunny

Whew, I'm beat.

That was one crazy holiday.

The fight between Ayeka-oneesama and Ryoko-oneechan might have been the flashiest one yet.

Sasami is tired, so I'm going to sleep now.

ZZZZZZZZ...

Wait, I have to write this down.

Stop complaining to Ryoko-oneechan about the ice cream!

And if Washu-chan asks for a favor, run away as fast as you can!

Aura of Love

The Masaki family motto is: "Diligence and Hard Work are the Pillars of the Soul."

This motto had existed since the time Tenchi's mother, Achika, was alive, and it used to make young Tenchi tilt his head in confusion. He understood early on that "Hard Work" meant doing things with all your might, but he used to think "Diligence" (*kinben*) had something to do with the toilet (*benjo*). That was because the Masaki household had various other confusing slogans posted all over the place.

The head priest of the Masaki Shrine, Katsuhito, paid no mind to young Tenchi's questions, writing out phrases like "Great Enlightenment" or "Self-Cultivation and Home Management" on calligraphy paper and changing them every month. Thus, Tenchi grew up thinking every household necessarily had monthly slogans. He only realized it was just his grandfather's hobby when he was in middle school.

The rainy season had ended. Feeling the refreshing morning air flowing in through the open window, Katsuhito sat at his writing desk, rubbing an inkstick.

"All Humanity are Brothers."

Katsuhito murmured and furrowed his brows. It had occurred to him that there were more aliens than humans in the Masaki household.

"Making a slogan that even a monkey can understand is quite a task."

Katsuhito began rubbing the ink again. Sudden6ly, a gust of wind rose, carrying an eerie energy that had no business being in a clear morning.

"Who goes there!?"

Instantly, the fishy, supernatural aura vanished, leaving only the sound of birds chirping. Katsuhito remained in a kneeling position, reading the surrounding energy with his mind's eye. He then closed the lid of his writing box, left the shrine office, and stepped into the grounds.

"I smell something spectral."

The direction of the Masaki house, visible at the foot of the hill, suddenly grew dark. Katsuhito glared at the roof of the Masaki house with a grim expression, then abruptly turned and disappeared into the trees down the stone steps.

At the Masaki house, breakfast had just finished.

"Honestly, Ryoko-san!!"

Ayeka was standing tall in the center of the living room.

"Where are you!? Today is the day you are cleaning the toilet. Do you think you can get away with skipping it for two or three weeks? If you don't do it right now, you get no dinner! Do you hear me?"

"Shut up," a voice came from near her feet. "I have good hearing. You don't have to shout like that for me to hear you."

"Eek!"

Ayeka instinctively jumped back. Ryoko's head was peering up at her from between her braced legs.

"How lewd! Why were you there?! I'm telling Lord Tenchi!"

"Idiot."

Ryoko gave a faint smirk, floated up lightly, and settled onto a ceiling beam.

"Unlike you, I don't use the toilet. The food I ingest is completely broken down and converted 100% into energy. Since I don't use it, I don't need to clean it. Ryo-Ohki is the same. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"But... it's unfair!" Ayeka persisted. "Regardless of whether you use it or not, we live in this house together, so the logical thing is to share all duties equally! You eat several times more than anyone else, yet you do a tenth of the work!"

"You want equality?"

Ryoko looked down at Ayeka with her cold, three-white-sided eyes.

"Then it’s okay if I return Ryo-Ohki to her original size and drop her energy conversion rate by half? That’ll be a sight to see. A giant poop right in the middle of the field—"

"Ugh..."

As Ayeka turned pale, Ryoko pressed her advantage.

"If I drop the efficiency to human levels, that's naturally what happens. Maybe I should try it once. Then you or Tenchi would have to clean it up. That actually sounds like it could be fun..."

"What are you talking about so early in the morning?"

Tenchi murmured as he entered the living room with a haggard face.

"Shouting about such gross things. I could hear you all the way at the entrance."

"They're dirty sisters, aren't they, Ryo-chan?"

Sasami didn't particularly hate this kind of talk, but in times like this, she sided with Ryo-Ohki.

"But is it true? Could Ryo-chan really make a poop that big...?"

"Meow, meow, meow!"

Ryo-Ohki perked up her ears and shook her head desperately.

"We're going shopping today, so get ready. George-san, do you need help with anything?"

In the kitchen, George was finishing the cleanup and preparing tea.

"Tenchi-san?"

George, crouching in front of the stove, was clicking the igniter repeatedly.

"It's suddenly acting up; it won't catch fire. I'll take a look now, so could you wait a bit longer?"

"What is it? What happened?"

Sasami poked her head in and approached the stove. Suddenly, with a *whoosh*, a blue flame rose and lunged at Sasami.

"Watch out!"

Tenchi instinctively shielded Sasami and ducked onto the kitchen floor. The flame vanished in an instant, leaving a fishy smell in the air.

"Fish... It smells like rotten fish!"

"Eh?"

"Tenchi-niichan, there's a nasty smell in here!"

"A nasty smell?"

Tenchi and George looked at each other.

"A gas leak!?"

George quickly turned off the main valve and threw the windows open. Immediately, a lukewarm wind blew in and wrapped twice around Tenchi's neck.

"No... if it were a gas leak, the alarm would go off. This is..."

The hair on the back of his neck stood up.

"Ke-ke-ke-ke-ke."

A raspy laugh echoed from behind the refrigerator, and the teacups on the table began to rattle.

"Who's there!?"

Suddenly, the noise stopped, and there was the sound of something pattering out of the kitchen.

"Ryoko? Stop with the bad jokes!"

"What is the matter, Lord Tenchi?"

Ayeka poked her head from behind the curtain. At that moment...

Slurp.

A monstrously large face appeared out of nowhere, licked Ayeka from her feet to the tip of her nose, and vanished.

"KYAAAAAAH!"

While Sasami let out an ear-piercing scream, Ayeka fainted, falling right into the arms of Ryoko, who happened to be behind her.

"What was that?"

Ryoko wrinkled her nose, sniffed the air, and made a disgusted face.

"Stinks. Did someone fart?"

"Ryoko-oneechan, a gho... a ghost..."

When Ryoko looked around, a round head like a volleyball was floating in mid-air, sticking out a long tongue.

"You!!"

Ryoko dumped the unconscious Ayeka onto the floor, balled her fists, and swung at it.

"Ayeka-san!"

While the horrified Tenchi tended to Ayeka, the ghost let out a mocking cackle and vanished.

"Just a low-level spirit, and you dare mock me!"

Ryoko was absolutely livid.

"What on earth is going on!?"

Wondering why he had to deal with this first thing in the morning, Tenchi lightly patted Ayeka's cheek.

"Ayeka-san, Ayeka-san."

Ayeka woke up and immediately clung to Tenchi.

"No! Lord Tenchi, save me!"

"Whoa... hey."

Tenchi felt the blood drain from his face as Ryoko turned around with her eyes narrowed into triangles. The atmosphere suddenly felt like a disaster was about to strike.

"Listen, Ryoko... I don't want you to misunderstand, but you didn't call that thing here, did you?"

"What are you talking about!? Hey, get off him!"

"That monster just now wasn't you, right?"

"I don't know! Hey, Ayeka!"

Ryoko grabbed Ayeka by the collar and forced her away from Tenchi.

"Ow, ow! That hurts!"

"Of course it does! Don't get so cozy with my Tenchi. Besides, are you really the type to faint over a little ghost?"

"What did you say!? There is a limit to your pranks! My heart genuinely felt like it stopped. What would you have done if I hit my head!?"

"I keep telling you it wasn't me! Why do you blame me for everything!?"

"It's okay, Tenchi-niichan. Let's go over there."

Sasami, having recovered from the initial shock, pulled on Tenchi's sleeve.

"Eh? Yeah..."

Tenchi felt unsettled as he squeezed past the arguing pair and turned on the TV in the living room. The cheerful chatter of a morning talk show began to play.

"It's weird..."

If it wasn't Ryoko, what was that ghost? Just then, the lights dimmed and a chill ran down his spine.

"Tenchi-niichan!"

Patter, patter, patter. Footsteps could be heard. Sasami froze as she noticed spots like plum blossoms moving across the floor. *Patter, patter, patter.* The footprints climbed the wall, walked across the ceiling, and stopped right above their heads.

"No!"

Sasami clung to Tenchi's arm and squeezed her eyes shut.

"It's not... Ryo-Ohki, is it?"

Instead of an answer, eerie music began to play from the TV. Startled, Tenchi looked at the screen to see a lonely graveyard at twilight. Then, a title written in blood appeared:

"Welcome to the Spirit World..."

In an instant, the screen turned blood-red. Along with the crashing sound of shattering glass, a long, agonizing death-scream echoed through the room.

"Tenchi-niichan, I'm scared!"

Sasami instinctively looked away from the TV.

The screen slowly panned across the cemetery and came to a stop in front of a tilted tombstone.

With a creaking, grating sound—*gi, gi, giii*—the headstone began to lift. A half-skeletal hand emerged from within, and there was the unsettling sound of something slithering out.

"The TV! Turn off the TV!!"

Tenchi, who had been staring blankly as if under a hypnotic spell, snapped to his senses at the sound of Sasami's voice. He grabbed the remote and hit the power button.

"Eh!?"

On the screen, a corpse that looked like it had been in the grave for six months stood up and smirked at Tenchi.

"Why won't it turn off!?"

Panicking, Tenchi rushed to the TV, trying to turn it off at the main power switch on the unit itself. Suddenly, a cold hand reached out from the screen and grabbed Tenchi's wrist.

"Hic...!"

For a heartbeat, his heart froze.

"L-Let go!"

Ayeka and Ryoko, who had long since stopped their fighting to peer at the living room TV from the kitchen, froze with their eyes wide. A skeletal leg stepped over the edge of the screen, followed by a head poking out.

"I'm going to possess youuu~"

The corpse released Tenchi's wrist and moved toward Ayeka and Ryoko.

"Kyaaaa!!"

Ryoko vanished instantly. Ayeka fled into the kitchen. George, who came out just as they were switching places, ended up running face-first into the corpse and being hugged by it.

"Sasami-chan, run!"

Frantic, Tenchi shoved Sasami toward the entryway and put his hands on the corpse’s shoulders. With a disgusting sensation, something slimy stuck to his hands.

"You'll do tooo~"

The corpse spun around, spreading its arms to embrace Tenchi.

"Gah!"

Tenchi leaped back. In the meantime, the mud-covered George opened the storage room door and dove into Washu’s laboratory.

"Tenchi-san, I'm sorry! Please wait just a bit!"

"A bit? You mean...!"

Because he was so flustered, Tenchi couldn't use his Master Key. He ran around the room as the corpse began to chase him, splattering mud and rotten flesh everywhere.

"Tenchi-niichaaan!"

A pathetic voice called out from the entryway.

"The door won't open! I don't know what to do!"

"Sasami? Big sister is coming for you right now!"

Ayeka, who had been trembling in the middle of the kitchen surrounded by pots dancing rhythmically and chopsticks walking on two legs, bravely dashed past the corpse and rushed to the entryway.

"Why won't it open!? Fine, I shall use the power of Jurai..."

Struggling with the sliding door, which felt as if it were glued shut, Ayeka backed up while holding Sasami and held her hands out toward the door. Just then, someone tickled her armpits, and Ayeka burst out laughing in spite of herself.

"Stop it! Stop it, Sasami!"

"It’s not Sasami...!"

Startled, Ayeka looked back to find a ghost that was nothing but a hand, wriggling its fingers.

"IYAAAAAAAH!?"

Ayeka and Sasami took off running, with the hand chasing after them like a rocket punch.

"Ayeka-dono! Over here, over here!"

The storage room door swung open, and Washu poked her head out, beckoning them. Ayeka and Sasami dove inside, the door slammed shut, and the hand—having lost its target—braked hard and changed direction.

"This has turned into quite a mess," Washu said, looking into the living room through a dimensional window in the lab alongside Ayeka and the others. She turned to George. "We've got quite a few uninvited guests. Well, Ryoko is there, so I think Tenchi-dono will be alright."

Apparently, a great number of Spirit World inhabitants had poured out of the TV. The living room was now crowded with fluffy white ghosts, corpses, skeletons, and a soaking-wet female phantom, while pale-blue wisps of spirit fire drifted through the air.

"Hey! Shoo! Don't come over here!"

Tenchi sat on the sofa, looking pale and exhausted. Beside him, Ryoko stood tall with her aura blade in hand, fending off the monsters.

"Hey, Ryoko. I... I don't really want to say this, but..." Tenchi looked around the room, which was now a virtual museum of ghosts. He averted his eyes from a hairy monster that was peering up at him intently from the floor. "Could you explain how this happened? Like... could it be that you're calling forth these spirits and monsters without even realizing it?"

"I'm the one who wants to know!" Ryoko threatened a nearby ghost with her fist. "For the record, I didn't call them, and I don't remember asking them to come. Look, even Ryo-Ohki is terrified. They started swarming out since this morning—don't monsters usually come out at night?"

At that, the monsters all burst out laughing at once.

"Mya!"

Ryo-Ohki scrambled under the sofa in a panic. Even the hairy monster smirked.

"What's so funny, you creeps!?"

Furious, Ryoko swung her aura blade. In an instant, the monsters were cut to pieces... or so it seemed, but a moment later they joined back together as if nothing had happened.

"Ge-hyahyahyahya!"

The vulgar laughter grew even louder. Decapitated heads and spirit fires bounced around, making the air in the room vibrate with a crackling energy.

"Lord Tenchi!"

"Poor Ryo-chan..."

"Now, now, just wait a second." Washu pulled back Ayeka, who had instinctively leaned forward, and poked her own head through the dimensional window. "Tenchi-dono, can you hear me? It looks like the Masaki house and the Spirit World have become linked."

"Washu-san!?"

Tenchi jumped as Washu's head suddenly appeared in mid-air.

"I suspect they used Ryoko as a terminal to open a path. How troublesome."

"Troublesome? You mean..."

"It means that at this rate, the Masaki house is going to become a transit point for the Spirit World."

"Does that mean the house has been taken over?"

"To put it simply, yes," Washu nodded as if saying *well done*.

"Then what's going to happen to us?"

"Who knows... It seems they don't have any immediate plans other than scaring you. This house is a mix of all kinds of bio-energy, so it's quite comfortable for them. Yeah, they probably plan to stimulate you appropriately to make you release energy so they can sip it up bit by bit. These spiritual entities love negative energy like fear and anxiety, so..."

"Can we not go outside!?" Tenchi shouted.

"As far as I can see from this side, the space is sealed shut."

"No way..." Tenchi suddenly remembered his plans for the day. "I promised to have lunch at the family restaurant with Kiyone-san and the others. The fridge is empty—what are we supposed to do!?"

"Hmm..." Washu knit her brows in thought. "Maybe you have some somen noodles or something? Or ramen?"

"Stop talking nonsense!!"

Ayeka, who had been listening in silence, finally lost her patience. "Are you saying we should eat lunch with corpses and monsters!? We'll catch germs and get sick!"

"Big sister, that’s not it..." Sasami pulled on her sleeve. "If we can't go outside, what about Ryo-chan's food? Are we going to be here forever?"

"No, there are plenty of ways to get outside, but that’s not really the issue here... Tenchi-dono, Washu-chan will think of something, so just relax for now."

"That’s so heartless..."

"Tenchi-san, I am truly sorry," George said, bowing apologetically. Just then, the telephone rang.

Tenchi stood up, startled, and the monsters immediately swarmed around him.

"Wait... the phone is ringing..."

"Hello, Spirit World Terminal here. Who are you? Eh? Kiyone? Never heard of her." A damp female voice echoed from the entryway.

"Don't just do whatever you want...! Hey, stop it! I said stop it!"

"You creeps! What are you doing to my Tenchi!?"

A ball of light appeared in Ryoko's hand and exploded around Tenchi, who was being carried aloft by the monsters. The monsters scattered with screams... but as soon as the flash faded, they returned to normal.

"The shockwave didn't work!?"

"That's enough! That's enough, Ryoko!?"

By the time Tenchi—who had been tossed into the air by monsters and hit directly by Ryoko’s shockwave—was released, the phone had already hung up.

"Why didn't my power work!?" Ryoko looked quite shocked.

On the other end of the line, Kiyone furrowed her brows and stared intently at the phone.

"Mihoshi. Something's wrong at Tenchi-san's place. Some woman I don't know answered and said 'Spirit World Terminal'."

"Eeeh? Since when did it become that?"

"Has a monster appeared again?" the manager of Three Stars Convenience Store asked. He was a straight-laced citizen, but he had experience with the strange phenomena at the Masaki house once before.

"Yes... Manager, I'm worried, so I'd like to go check it out."

"Can I come toooo?"

By the time Kiyone and Mihoshi arrived at the Masaki house, dark clouds were already hanging low over the entire property, and an ominous atmosphere lingered.

"This is..."

"Oh no... it looks like rain or thunder is coming, doesn't it?"

After knocking Mihoshi down out of habit, Kiyone put her hand on the sliding front door. To her surprise, it opened easily, and a woman in white kimono, kneeling politely, greeted them.

"Welcome to the Spirit World. Please, this way."

The woman stood up smoothly and began walking down the hallway ahead of them.

"Wait! Who are you? Where are Tenchi-san and the others?"

The woman continued ahead without even looking back.

"Wait! What is the meaning of this!?"

Kiyone and Mihoshi hurried after her... or at least they tried, but they couldn't catch up at all. Not only that, the hallway seemed to keep stretching on forever.

By the time Kiyone looked back, startled, the entryway that should have been there had vanished into darkness. When she turned back around, the woman was gone too.

"Kiyoneeee..."

"W-what is going on!?"

Then, from behind them came heavy footsteps—*thump, thump*.

"K-Kiyone-chan, look at that foot..."

Turning around in shock, they saw a hairy foot—seemingly a hundred times larger than Kiyone—approaching them with a ground-shaking thud.

"KYAAAAAAH!"

The duo took off at full speed. No matter how far they ran, the hallway didn't end... but then, suddenly, they emerged into a pitch-black cemetery at night. The ghosts and corpses wandering listlessly all turned toward them at once.

"I... I can't... I can't run anymore."

"Not in a place like this... Mihoshi, pull yourself together! Run!"

Then, in the distance, they saw a familiar figure in a kimono.

"Katsuhito-san!?"

Kiyone couldn't believe her eyes, but there was no time to hesitate. "It's Tenchi-san's grandfather! Wait!!"

They ran toward him, nearly tripping over themselves.

"Oh! Kiyone-san and Mihoshi-san. Have you two been caught as well?"

"Grandfather..." Kiyone was so relieved she almost slumped to the ground.

"I was careless," Katsuhito said, lowering his wooden sword and looking around the seemingly infinite cemetery. "I forgot to re-seal Ryoko’s shrine. Spectral energy built up and opened a gateway to the Spirit World. No doubt Tenchi’s place is a mess by now. I must get there quickly, but..."

"So that's what happened?"

A window opened in the graveyard, and Washu poked her face through. "So, unless we close the hole to the Spirit World, this whole area is going to be swallowed up. I see. I guess I'll have to use *that* after all."

"Washu-san!?"

"Hmm? Good work. It's a help that you're here. I was looking for a route into the Spirit World from my side, so—sorry about this—I used the spot where that monster lured you in as a marker."

"Eh!?" They looked at each other.

"Explanations later. I'm going to call everyone else, so stay right there."

The window closed instantly, and Washu's face vanished. Returning to her lab, Washu moved efficiently, taking parts from various sub-space storage units and assembling a triangular mechanism that looked like it possessed pyramid power. When she flipped the switch, the tip of the pyramid began to glow.

"This part is fine. Next..."

Washu beckoned Ayeka and Sasami over. "You two, touch this pyramid and think of something with a kind heart."

When they did as they were told, the tip of the pyramid shone white.

"Yes, yes, that's it. Now, what were you thinking of?"

"Lord Tenchi..."

"Ryo-chan."

Washu smirked at their answers. "That's positive energy. Remember that."

Lunchtime had long since passed, and Tenchi was pacing restlessly around the house.

"I wonder what happened to Washu-san. Kiyone-san must be worried too."

"Hey, Tenchi! Come over here and have some ramen!" Ryoko, who had already grown accustomed to the situation, shouted from the kitchen. "These guys have started a banquet. They don't have food, so they're eating the scraps. Watching them crunch through bones is pretty interesting."

Come to think of it, he had noticed the kitchen had been noisy for a while now.

"Yeah. The Spirit World might actually be kind of fun. I never really hated this kind of stuff to begin with."

"Honestly, you..." Tenchi murmured as he dialed the Masaki Shrine office for the third time. "Where did Gramps go? Did he say he was going out...?"

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Tenchi-dono."

Washu, Ayeka, and the others emerged from the storage room door.

"Alright, let's go. Time to plug the hole to the Spirit World."

"Plug the hole to the Spirit World!? What are you talking about?"

"Like I said... everything has a cause, right? No matter how inexplicable a phenomenon seems, there’s always a solution if you trace it back to its source. Now, Ryoko!"

As she spoke, Washu entered the living room, pulled Ryo-Ohki out from under the sofa, and grabbed Ryoko by the collar.

"Ryo-chan!"

"Mya-myaa!!" Ryo-Ohki immediately leaped onto Sasami’s head.

"You have no shame. What are you doing drinking sake with ghosts?"

Once everyone was gathered in the hallway, the surroundings grew dark, and pale blue lights began to flicker at the end of the hall.

"Thanks for the setting, George. You can close this passage once we're inside."

Washu took the lead and walked briskly ahead. After traveling through the same passage Mihoshi and the others had used, they emerged in the graveyard to find Mihoshi sitting on a tombstone, listening intently to a ghost’s life story.

"Yes, yes, that sounds like a hard life. But you mustn't give up. I'm sure something good will happen from now on..."

"Tenchi-saaan!" Kiyone ran toward them.

"Kiyone-san! And even Gramps...!"

Mihoshi brushed damp mud off her backside. "Apparently, a hole opened up in Ryoko-san's shrine? These ghosts said that's how they came out. They're happy to be free."

A shy-looking male ghost bowed repeatedly to Tenchi and the others.

"But they say that deep inside the Spirit World's hole, a terrifying power is swirling, and it will suck in everything that’s living, so we have to be careful."

"It’s already getting closer," Washu said, pointing toward the edge of the cemetery.

A black-as-pitch hole, like a swirling black hole, was moving slowly toward them. At the same time, a freezing chill swept through the graveyard, and new spirits and corpses began to rise one after another. Every face was filled with curses and twisted with hatred.

"That's more negative energy than I expected. If we don't take this seriously, we might be swallowed up along with the Masaki house and turn into zombies."

Washu laid out white and red cloths on the ground and set the pyramid on top of them. When she turned it on, a light barrier emerged from the pyramid, enveloping everyone.

"You'll be safe as long as you stay inside this boundary. Now, everyone, pair up with someone you like. Hold hands and think of the other person with all your heart! Only that positive energy can seal the hole to the Spirit World."

Ayeka and Ryoko immediately moved to Tenchi’s sides. Sasami hugged Ryo-Ohki tightly, and Mihoshi—who was already clinging to Kiyone—looked at Katsuhito with concern.

"Ryo-chan, you were scared, weren't you? But it's okay now because Sasami is here."

"Myaa!"

The tip of the pyramid glowed, and the barrier strengthened.

"I'm sorry I left you behind. Sasami loves Ryo-chan!"

"Myan ♡"

The light from the pyramid became blinding.

"Tenchi! I love you. I love you with my power at full blast!"

"I love you much, much more! Lord Tenchi, please look at me."

"Shut up! Don't try to hog him!"

"You're the one trying to monopolize Lord Tenchi!"

While Ryoko and Ayeka argued around Tenchi, the pyramid's light weakened and began to flicker.

"Hey, you two! What are you fighting for!? The hole just got bigger!"

Looking over, the Spirit World’s hole had expanded rapidly and was approaching like an accelerating tornado.

"Come on, Tenchi-dono! If you don't pull yourself together, the aura of love won't come out. You're a man—do something about a woman or two!"

Shouted at by Washu, Tenchi hesitantly put his hands around the backs of the two women and whispered something.

"Eh?"

Since Ryoko and Ayeka both leaned in to hear at the same time, their heads collided with a dull thud, and sparks flew.

"That hurts! Ryoko-san, you did that on purpose!?"

"Ouch... You're the one who did it on purpose!"

"Agh, honestly! The barrier has disappeared!"

As soon as Washu shouted, the ground beneath them began to crumble, and deep cracks spread in all directions. The giant abyss of the Spirit World had opened up.

"KYAAAAAAH!"

Ayeka clung desperately to the edge of the abyss.

"Gods and Buddhas!!" Tenchi cried out instinctively. "I'll do anything if we can just go home! I won't ever think of myself as unhappy again!"

"I swear I won't fight with Ryoko anymore if I can return alive," Ayeka vowed.

"Sasami will cook even more delicious food!"

"Kiyo-chan, hold my hand if we fall!"

"Mya-myaa! Mya-mya-myan!"

Finally, the last foothold crumbled, and everyone vanished, leaving only Katsuhito standing on a needle-like pillar of rock.

"Gramps!?"

Katsuhito was making a ritual hand sign as if challenging the hole to the Spirit World.

Ah, it's no use...

Ayeka, Ryoko, Mihoshi, Kiyone, and Sasami were all being sucked headlong into the hole.

If this was going to happen, I should have said it properly. I love you, Ryoko. I love you, Ayeka...

The moment Tenchi felt that regret, the fall slowed down. The pyramid Washu was holding emitted a brilliant light. The barrier had returned, catching everyone like a net.

"The psycho-power is back! Everyone, heighten your aura of love even more!" Washu shouted, clutching the pyramid.

"Ryo-chan, I'll make carrot curry when we get back!"

"Ryoko-san, I'll give you a kiss when we get back!"

"I don't want it!"

With that, Ryoko's body began to plummet.

"This is no good! You won't be saved unless you change your attitude!" Washu's reprimand rang out. "Say it, even if it's a lie! Say: 'Ayeka, I'm sorry for being mean. Let's get along.'"

"Like I'd ever..."

The falling speed instantly doubled.

"Fine! I'll say it! Is that what you want!?" Ryoko screamed in desperation. "Ayeka! You're a good person! I'd... be so relieved if you weren't around!"

The black mist of the Spirit World enveloped Ryoko's body. Her face turned pale, as if the blood had been drained from it, and twisted in agony.

"Dammit, I can't say it!!"

"Ryoko!!"

Tenchi instinctively grabbed Ryoko's arm.

"Why are you being so stubborn!? There's no reason to fight at the cost of your life! If you're gone, what am I supposed to do!?"

"You really are a fool. Ryoko, you are coming home with me! When we get back, you're going to apologize to everyone for your sheer stupidity!!"

Ayeka shouted at Ryoko with a look like she was about to bite her, then pulled her hand with all her might.

"Ayeka...!?"

Suddenly, Ryoko's body felt light. The pyramid emitted a powerful light, enveloping Tenchi and the others, and they began to ascend rapidly.

"Yes, that’s it! This is the aura of love!"

Though dazed, Tenchi felt the auras of the seven people and one animal melt together, becoming one. The hole to the Spirit World receded into the distance. Then, a brilliant light flashed, and his consciousness momentarily whited out.

"It's alright now."

When they came to, they were at the entrance of Ryoko’s shrine.

"The seal is complete. I'm truly sorry; it was my oversight."

"Gramps??"

The sound of birds chirping filled the air, and the usual summer afternoon light filtered through the trees in shimmering patches.

"Well, I'll refrain from pressing the issue of someone's mistake too deeply. In truth, if Katsuhito-dono hadn't worked so hard over there to place the final seal, returning would have been difficult," Washu said, smiling as she cradled the Love Aura Amplification and Conversion Device, its job now finished. "So, that's that. Let's go home and order some sushi to celebrate."

When they returned to the house, George was busy cleaning up the mess left by the monsters.

"Tenchi-san! I... I wasn't able to be of any help..."

"No, George. There is no one in this Masaki household who isn't needed."

Washu turned toward Ryoko and smirked. "Well? Did you two learn a little something about the preciousness of love?"

"Hmph...!"

Ayeka and Ryoko stole a glance at each other, turned red, and looked away.

"This is what happens once the danger has passed," Washu remarked.

The next day, a slogan written in bold, dark ink was posted in the Masaki living room:

"Love and Friendship. —Katsuhito"

"...That’s quite nice, Father-in-law."

Nobuyuki, who had returned late the previous night and knew nothing of the events, stared at the slogan admiringly and gave a deep nod.

August 12th — Cloudy, then Rain

Heh heh heh... ♡

Guess what's here right now?

Ryoko-chan? Ding-dong! Correct!!

Ayeka-oneesama? Bzzzt! Wrong!!

Right now, Sasami is in Uncle Nobuyuki's room.

Uncle said he'd be doing research in the library, so I could use his bed. ♡

And, well, the reason I'm here is...

Sasami is with a ghost!

If Big Sister or Ryoko-oneechan found out, there'd be a huge scene. I thought about going to Tenchi-niichan's room, but he's already asleep, and I figured Uncle would listen to my request.

It's 1:00 AM... which means it's already the 13th.

Right, Fluffy-chan?

Oh, Fluffy-chan is a tiny ghost.

It's white and floats around like a handkerchief magic trick. It has eyes and a mouth, and it feels chilly when you touch it.

Right now, it's playing with Ryo-chan on the bed.

Apparently, it was exploring the house and missed its chance to go back to the ghost world.

I wonder if its mommy and daddy are worried?

So, here is the ghost's handprint. ♡

Only Sasami can see it!

I actually wanted it to leave footprints, but it *is* a ghost, after all~.

Oh, sorry!!

Autumn Day

Autumn invites one into reflection.

The autumn wind immerses the heart in the reminiscence of days gone by.

And autumn also makes a certain young boy look back upon days that will never return.

"The sky is so blue..."

Masaki Tenchi, the only son of the Masaki family, paused his farm work and looked up at the piercingly clear sky. Wearing his *samue* and holding a hoe, he looked completely at home with the earth.

"It’s already September... School has started, and I bet everyone is busy."

Having completely severed his ties with school, Tenchi suddenly thought of his old friends' faces and sighed. Since it was a technical high school, his mind was filled with the faces of unkempt boys.

"I wonder how Amagasaki is doing..."

Of all his old friends, one particularly annoying face came to mind. The last time they’d met in person was once at a tea shop in town after Tenchi had dropped out.

"He was a strange guy..."

For a while after he stopped going to school, he got quite a few calls from his other friends, but after meeting them a few times outside, they all eventually drifted apart. Among them, for some reason, only Amagasaki would call him occasionally, as if remembering him out of the blue.

"I wonder if he’s still forging ahead on the path of the *otaku*."

He felt like Amagasaki had told him all sorts of things—talk of idols, anime, and the like—but he had forgotten it all.

"Come to think of it, he really did have a thing for girls with long hair."

Tenchi rested his chin on his folded hands atop the hoe and gazed at the impressive carrot patch. The field grew not just carrots, but various seasonal vegetables.

Well, it doesn't matter... Tenchi murmured to himself.

There’s no point in going back to school now, and inviting friends over would just lead to a barrage of questions, which would be a pain. Tenchi sighed, lifted his hoe, and got back to work.

The aforementioned Amagasaki was currently wiping sweat from his brow as he walked the path leading to the Masaki house. He was actually on his way to deliver an invitation to a class reunion. Of course, he could have just mailed it, but that was a mere excuse; in truth, he had come to spy on the Masaki household. He wanted to uncover the truth of what Tenchi—who had so abruptly quit school—was actually doing at home.

"I heard a girl—a relative or a distant cousin—is living with him."

"There are at least three of them."

The talk among his friends was all speculation and lacked substance.

"I wonder why he became such a hermit."

Amagasaki, who had been quite close to Tenchi, found the thought incredibly frustrating. Now, if Tenchi had looked down from the field, he surely would have spotted his old friend's large frame. But Tenchi, never dreaming that Amagasaki would visit, continued his work in silence and didn't notice him at all.

Amagasaki, for his part, never dreamed that Tenchi wouldn't be there. He assumed that someone who quit school would naturally be at home and that he’d definitely see him if he went.

"...He really is weird," Amagasaki grumbled. "Whenever I say I'll visit, he makes up all kinds of excuses to turn me down. And sometimes a woman answers the phone, but he never introduces me. He’s definitely hiding something."

Ding-dong. The chime rang. Ryoko, who was lounging on a ceiling beam, and Ayeka, who was watching TV on the sofa, both looked up.

"Ryoko-san, a visitor."

"Shut up. Why don't you go?"

The chime rang again. *Ding-dong*.

"Fine, fine, I'm going."

The Princess of the Jurai Imperial House, currently acting as the Masaki housekeeper, stood up reluctantly and went to the door.

"Um... is Tenchi-kun here?"

Standing before her was an unkempt man she had never seen before. Ayeka stared at him from head to toe.

"Oh... um, who might you be?"

"My name's Amagasaki..."

Amagasaki, in turn, was staring from head to toe at the young woman wearing strange clothes.

She's a beauty... is this the rumored housemate?

"What do you want?" Ryoko poked her head out. "You got business with this house?"

"Uh, Tenchi-kun..."

Another woman! Amagasaki's eyes widened as he scanned Ryoko, who had come out to the entryway. Her features were sharper compared to the woman in the kimono, but she had an outstanding figure.

"Oh, you want Tenchi? Well, come on in."

Ryoko looked Amagasaki up and down without reservation and jerked her chin toward the house without so much as a smile.

"Uh, okay..."

Amagasaki hesitated, wondering if it was really okay to enter, and looked around the entryway. "Is Tenchi not here?"

"He's not here right now."

"Honestly, Ryoko-san!" the woman in the kimono scolded. "Lord Tenchi is out in the fields right now. I'm sure he'll be back soon for tea... Um, Amagasaki-san, was it? Are you perhaps a friend of Lord Tenchi?"

"Yeah, we were classmates at West Technical High."

Lord Tenchi!? Amagasaki nearly flipped out internally. *Is it some special relationship where she calls him 'Lord'? That lucky bastard...*

Amagasaki decided for the moment to tie up the thought of Tenchi and shove it into the attic of his mind. He was going to uncover this secret no matter what. It was actually more convenient that Tenchi wasn't here. He felt that coming by surprise today was the right move.

"Well, excuse me then..."

Feeling giddy inside, he took off his shoes and was about to step up into the house when a voice spoke.

"Who is it, big brother??"

A young girl about the age of an elementary student was peeking out from the kitchen. She had long hair tied high in two pigtails that hung down like twin tails, and she had large eyes.

S-she's cute... Amagasaki murmured, almost moved to tears.

"Sasami? This is Amagasaki-san, a friend of Lord Tenchi."

"Heh~. It’s rare for a friend of Tenchi-niichan to visit."

I see... her name is Sasami-chan. Amagasaki, led into the living room, couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Hmm... You’re quite different from Tenchi." Ryoko sat down next to Amagasaki, bringing her face so close their noses almost touched as she scrutinized him.

"W-what is it!?"

"Nothing, you're just a rare sight. Tenchi never brings friends over. The only men I see in this house are Tenchi, Gramps, and the Old Man." Ryoko pulled back and looked Amagasaki over with great curiosity. "You've got a lot of extra meat on you. You should do some training or farm work like Tenchi. On a planet I visited a long time ago, there was this creature with no natural predators that got so lazy it grew so big it couldn't even see its own butt. I wondered what would happen to it, and when I went back next, it was already extinct. I had a good laugh."

"Huh???"

"Ryoko-san!!" The woman in the kimono’s eyes sharpened. "How can you be so rude to a guest... Amagasaki-san, please forgive her. This woman is of low birth and doesn't know how to speak properly."

"Who's of low birth!?" The woman called Ryoko glared back. "You keep saying that like it's the only thing you know. Can 'Royalty' fill your stomach? Can 'Royalty' fix your terrible cooking? Quit hiding behind your title and say what's on your mind."

"It is not a title! I am speaking of character! That is why a pirate like you..."

"Now, now, sisters." Sasami, who was preparing tea in the kitchen, beckoned them. "I said, come here!"

Amagasaki listened to their conversation in total bewilderment, but snapped back to reality as soon as Ryoko and Ayeka were called away.

"Royal? Pirate?" *She said "a planet I visited a long time ago"!? What kind of roleplay is this??*

While Amagasaki was scratching his head, a whispered conversation began in the kitchen.

"Hey, hey, that person is Tenchi-niichan’s friend, right? Is it okay to let it slip that we're not Earthlings? Tenchi-niichan said before that once we step outside this house, we're Earthlings."

"We haven't stepped outside," Ryoko noted.

"I am of the Royal Family; I don't see why it matters," Ayeka added.

"Ugh, don't blame me if Tenchi-niichan gets mad at you." Sasami looked back and forth between her sisters in exasperation. "I really think it's better not to say anything until we ask him. You know how Tenchi-niichan gets really sensitive about that stuff. So, talk about the Juraian Royal Family or space..."

Sasami had a bad feeling and stopped mid-sentence, signaling her sisters. Suddenly, she heard a sound suggesting the person in question had snuck back to his seat. Just as Sasami suspected, Amagasaki—unable to bear not hearing the secret talk—had been slowly creeping toward the kitchen.

"What a creep." Forgetting she had treated him like an extinct species, Ryoko was already burning with combat spirit. "Let's just kick him out. I don't like his face anyway, and I don't care if he's Tenchi's friend."

"Ryoko-san, your voice is too loud! Imagine what Lord Tenchi would say if we did that."

"Sisters, don't fight there, just go back in the other room." Sasami shooed her sisters away, took the tray, and walked slowly into the living room.

"I'm sorry we don't have much to offer..."

"Oh, thank you..."

Sasami, who had fully mastered Earth-style hospitality, knelt and gracefully served the tea. Amagasaki was so flustered he nearly knocked over the teacup.

"You... you're cute."

"Eh." Sasami was startled, her cheeks flushing.

"What grade are you in? What school do you go to?"

"This child does not go to school. We have always had private tutors, so we have lived lives removed from school," Ayeka explained.

"I-I see..." *Tutors, huh... maybe that 'Royall' thing wasn't a lie after all,* Amagasaki thought, and the words slipped out. "By the way, what 'Royal Family' are you from?"

"Oh, I am glad you asked! I am Masaki Ayeka Jurai, the First Princess of the world-renowned Juraian Royal Family, and this child is the Second Princess, Sasami."

"Sister!" Sasami stood up in shock, but it was too late.

Ayeka, delighted that her sister had been complimented, smiled as she refilled his tea and offered snacks. "Please, make yourself at home. Other than Lord Tenchi, I haven't had much occasion to meet men, so please forgive me if I am rude. So, Amagasaki-san, what kind of relationship did you have with Lord Tenchi at school? He doesn't talk about those things much, so I am very curious."

"What kind? We're just regular pals."

Amagasaki, intoxicated by the unexpected hospitality, began to chatter away. "We'd talk about how we couldn't forgive that teacher, how Moritaka's legs are definitely 'pretty,' what new games were at the arcade, manga... mostly stuff like that. He's oddly serious, so he doesn't know much about idols. I actually like anime quite a bit, too. But since he's not an expert, we usually just ended up gossiping about friends."

"What is a pal'?"

Ayeka didn't understand most of the words Amagasaki used, but she decided not to pry too much and just asked about that one.

"A *pal* is a friend. But hey, why did you really come here? You were sniffing around the kitchen earlier, weren't you? If you want Tenchi, he's in the field, so why don't you just go there?"

Ryoko, annoyed by his eavesdropping, glared at Amagasaki, forgetting she was the one who let him in.

"Ryoko-san, that is rude!!"

Ayeka, whose opinion of Amagasaki had flipped completely after he complimented Sasami, snapped back. "How can you try to drive away a guest? Why don't *you* go and call Lord Tenchi?"

"Why should I be this guy's errand boy?"

Ryoko started to complain, but then she thought of something amusing. "Fine, I'll go. Amagasaki, you'd better keep your eyes peeled."

Ryoko gave a smirk and began to slowly vanish, starting from her toes.

"T-this person..." Amagasaki turned pale and began to tremble.

"Ke-ke-ke..."

Ryoko smirked as she faded away completely, only to reappear in the attic, where she lay flat and began to spy on the scene below.

"She vanished! She really vanished! What is she!? I'm not good with this kind of stuff!"

"That wretched woman!"

Ayeka stood up, fuming, and looked around the room. "How could she do such a thing!? Vanishing right in front of a guest's eyes. She could have at least waited

until she was in the hallway; I wish she’d show a little more consideration. Look, Amagasaki-san is terrified."

"Ho ho, my bad."

Ryoko stuck her head out from the ceiling and waved a hand at Amagasaki. "I wasn't raised well, so I might just do something outrageous."

Amagasaki stared up at the ceiling, frozen and unable to speak. Ryoko chuckled to herself.

She had originally intended to just scare him off, but his reactions were so good that she decided it would be a waste to simply let him go.

"In that case, I'll play with you as an apology," Ryoko said.

She instantly teleported to Amagasaki's side, threw her arm around him, and scooped him up.

"Man, you're heavy. How about a quick tour of the Masaki residence to start?"

Still holding Amagasaki, Ryoko vanished. An instant later, they reappeared on the second-story roof.

"Ah, what a view. It’s a waste to be stuck inside on a beautiful day like this. Next up, the Masaki Shrine... here we go!"

In the blink of an eye, the two were standing in the precinct of the Masaki Shrine.

"See? You can see the roof of the house from here. Behind that is the field, where the carrots are growing all wiggly and—"

"Hieee..." Amagasaki wheezed, barely able to breathe.

"We’ll save the field for later. How about the Seto Ohashi Bridge? Actually, I smashed that place up pretty good once. I haven't been back to see it since they fixed it."

"E-enough... I've had enough, really."

"What? You’re just as pathetic as Tenchi, aren't you?"

Ryoko adjusted her grip on Amagasaki and teleported again.

"Look, there it is. The Seto Ohashi. Brings back memories~."

They appeared high in the sky above the water, which sparkled in the late afternoon light. Ryoko intentionally began to fly slowly through the air.

"Right after I first came to Tenchi’s place, I fought Ayeka’s Ryu-Oh up here. Then my Ryo-Ohki impaled her ship and—*boom*—it crashed right down there."

Poor Amagasaki kept his eyes squeezed shut, far past the point of being able to respond.

"Hey! Open your eyes and look, or I’ll drop you!"

"Please, have mercy..." Amagasaki squeaked in a tiny voice.

"You really came here to spy on us, didn't you?" Ryoko whispered in a cooing tone. "You didn't come to talk to Tenchi. You came to see what kind of women he had, right?"

Amagasaki was speechless. "N-no, that's..."

"That kind of attitude really ticks me off."

Ryoko let go with one hand, causing Amagasaki's body to lurch.

"R-R-Ryoko-san!"

"Oops, my bad, my bad." Ryoko laughed mockingly as she pulled him back up. "Listen, I'm at Tenchi's because I want to be. There are plenty of other women at the Masaki house, but there's nothing vulgar going on like you're imagining. Sorry to ruin your little peek."

"I... I'm sorry." Amagasaki truly began to regret his choices. "It's just... I was jealous. I heard Tenchi quit school and was living with girls... I don't have anything. No girls, I'm no good at studying, and I have no special talents. I figured it wouldn't hurt if he introduced me to at least one."

"Heh~. And did you find anyone you liked?" Ryoko laughed heartily. "Just so you know, not a single one of us is an Earthling. If you're okay with that, I wouldn't mind dating you myself—though I *am* a space pirate."

"...A space... pirate!?"

"You bet." Ryoko grinned widely.

Amagasaki's heart rate jumped an entire octave.

Terrifying... but she's so beautiful... If a woman like this said she liked me, I might actually fall for it...

Suddenly, a flicker of reason returned to his panicked mind.

This is a dream. It has to be. If it's not a dream, then I've officially lost my mind.

"Do you like roller coasters? This Ryoko-sama will give you a special date."

In a great mood now, Ryoko adjusted her hold on Amagasaki and vanished from the sky over the Seto Ohashi bridge.

"I wonder where Ryoko-oneechan went?"

Back in the Masaki living room, Sasami and Ayeka were drinking tea and looking up at the ceiling with concern.

"Who knows... how far could they have gone?"

"I don't know~. After putting him through that, he'll probably never come back."

"Well, it's already done; there's nothing for it," Ayeka replied.

"I feel kind of bad for him... that guy looked so timid."

"I suppose so..." Ayeka was the type not to be easily rattled by things that had already happened.

"Maybe I should go call Tenchi-niichan," the kind-hearted Sasami said, becoming genuinely worried. "Sister, isn't this really bad? He's Tenchi-niichan's friend. It's his first time visiting, and if this happens... yeah, I'm going to call him!"

Just as Sasami stood up, Ryoko and Amagasaki appeared. Ryoko, who was now in high spirits, tossed a hollow-eyed Amagasaki onto the carpet.

"Man, we went to the Seto Ohashi after that. Then we stopped by Highland and rode the roller coaster!"

"Ryoko-oneechan!" Sasami finally yelled. "I feel so bad for Niichan! He only just came to the house today. He doesn't know anything about us. Of course anyone would be shocked if you talk about Jurai or suddenly start warping them around everywhere. I'm telling Tenchi-niichan everything!"

"Hey now... it's just, this guy..." Ryoko hunched her shoulders like a scolded child.

Sasami knelt beside Amagasaki. "Are you okay? That must have been a shock. Ryoko-oneechan isn't a bad person, she's just a bit rough. Oh, do you want some water or something?"

Sasami ran to the kitchen and returned with a glass of cold water and a damp towel.

"You look pale. Do you want me to lay out a futon for you?"

"...Sasami-chan?" Amagasaki wiped his face with the cold towel and took the glass from her small hands. "I'm okay. You're a really kind girl."

"Oh, it's nothing~." Sasami fidgeted and looked down, blushing at the direct compliment.

"Are you alright?" Ayeka peered in. "I am sorry for what Ryoko-san put you through. If you like, I shall brew some fresh tea. Would you like some?"

"Ah... yes..." Amagasaki lowered his head, still dizzy, and looked at the Jurai sisters. Though they were different ages and types, he could sense a similar refined elegance and thoughtfulness in both.

"It must be nice..." the words slipped out. "Tenchi is so lucky. Getting such a cute younger sister and a beautiful older sister at the same time."

"Oh my!" Ayeka's cheeks flushed. "Please, don't tease me. Lord Tenchi is usually quite cross with me." Ayeka shot a glance at Ryoko. "It is because I am always bickering with this Ryoko, even though we live under the same roof."

"Women's bickering is kind of cute, though," Amagasaki replied, having recovered significantly. "My house is just three guys. There's no... 'softness' to it, I guess. I'm the second son, so I'm always getting the short end of the stick."

"Is that so?" Ayeka laughed refinedly and stood up with a graceful movement. "I shall go brew some tea. Ryoko-san, please look after our guest."

"Hmph." Ryoko ignored Ayeka, effortlessly hoisted Amagasaki up, and plopped him onto the sofa.

"See? She's annoying, isn't she? Putting on airs and acting like she's the most righteous person in the world. I'm the one who always gets the raw deal."

Ryoko's grumbling made Amagasaki feel strangely amused. "Ryoko-san, you seem like the type who loses out because you stand out, so you're the first one to get blamed. But people like you are usually pretty honest, so you're not actually a bad person."

"Ryoko-oneechan can't tell lies," Sasami chimed in with a smile. "They say it's written all over her face, right? You can tell right away. But I love Ryoko-oneechan."

"Yeah. I can understand that feeling. Sasami-chan, you don't dislike anyone, do you?"

"Ultra-miracle-super-shock!!" Sasami's eyes went wide. "Brother, how did you know?"

"I always wanted a sister like you," Amagasaki said, his eyes narrowing kindly. "But my brother was born instead, and he looks just like me. I was so disappointed. I really thought my family was destined to never have any girls."

"Then Sasami will be your sister!" Sasami leaned forward. "Whenever you come over to play, Sasami will be your sister. Then we can play together. What should we play? Cards? Games? Uno? Drawing?"

"They're all indoor games, aren't they?" Amagasaki looked at Sasami. "Next time, I'll take you to an amusement park. Or a zoo. Somewhere we can play all day long, okay?"

"Really!?" Sasami's face lit up. "Yay, hooray!! Amusement park! Amusement park!"

Sasami, who had been jumping for joy, suddenly stopped. "But Sasami doesn't have any money..."

"Don't worry about that. Leave it to me."

"Really? I love you, Brother!!" Sasami lunged and hugged Amagasaki around the neck.

"I'm home! Oh, do we have a visitor?"

"Ah, Tenchi-niichan!" Sasami flew to the entryway and pulled Tenchi by the hand. "Hey, hey, Tenchi-niichan's friend is here! And Sasami is going to be taken to the amusement park!"

"Friend?" Tenchi rushed into the living room.

"Yo, Tenchi."

"A-Amagasaki!?"

What Tenchi saw was Amagasaki sitting on the sofa looking completely relaxed, and Ryoko leaning nearby with a smirk.

"Welcome home, Tenchi. You're late." Ryoko walked over to Tenchi and gave him a loud kiss on the cheek.

"Ryoko!" Tenchi shoved her away in shock.

"What? It’s fine, isn't it~?"

"Welcome home, Lord Tenchi," Ayeka said, entering with a tray. "You didn't come back for tea today. Amagasaki-san has been waiting for a long time."

"Waiting for a long time?" Tenchi’s heart pounded. He couldn't imagine that nothing had happened while Amagasaki was waiting. What could have occurred? Had Ryoko and Ayeka fought? Had the Masaki secrets been exposed?

Amagasaki didn't seem rattled at all; he was just smiling, surrounded by the women.

"Well, please have some tea." At Ayeka’s voice, Tenchi sat down opposite Amagasaki, feeling suspicious.

"Tenchi, it’s been a while. You look well."

"U-uh, yeah. I guess..."

"Sorry for dropping by unannounced. I was just in the neighborhood."

"I see." Tenchi was still skeptical. *Something definitely happened while I was out. What could it have been? What did they talk about?*

"Lord Tenchi’s friend is quite an interesting person," Ayeka smiled refinedly.

"He’s just as timid as you are," Ryoko added with a laugh.

"That’s not true! Big Brother is very kind."

"You’re really lucky, you know," Amagasaki sighed. "Everyone is so wonderful. Sure, there might be some 'mysterious' things about them, but I guess that’s part of the charm, right?"

"Amagasaki..." Tenchi was speechless. "Does that mean you know... about Ayeka-san and Ryoko..."

"Just a little bit. To be honest, I was shocked. I totally get why you didn't say anything." Seeing Tenchi at a loss for words, Amagasaki laughed. "If it were me, I wouldn't be able to say anything either. It’s fine not to tell. Everyone has their own circumstances."

"Haaaah~~." Tenchi let out a long breath he’d been holding. "Really? You really won't tell? I’d hate it if rumors spread and people started swarming the place..."

"I wouldn't do something so wasteful," Amagasaki laughed. "Especially since I might finally be getting a cute younger sister."

Tenchi instinctively looked back at Sasami, who nodded with a smile. "I promised to be his sister."

"I-I see... Sasami-chan is so kind."

"Well, I've got work, so I should get going." Amagasaki stood up and looked at Sasami longingly. "Sasami-chan, thanks. I'll bring those amusement park tickets next time."

"Okay! I'll be waiting."

"Well, sorry for the intrusion."

As Amagasaki was putting on his shoes at the door, the storage room door opened and Washu poked her head out. "Oh, Amagasaki-kun, leaving already?"

Amagasaki spun around, startled.

"Ah, this is Washu-san..." Tenchi began to introduce her reluctantly.

"The greatest scientific genius in the universe, Washu-chan! ♡" Washu corrected him with a flirtatious wink, then looked at Amagasaki with a meaningful smirk. "I thought I wouldn't let you leave alive now that you know the Masaki secrets."

"Washu-san!?" Tenchi yelled as Amagasaki's eyes went wide.

"It's a joke, a joke! Come visit again. Next time, Washu-chan will take you into the world of super-science."

"No way! This person is Sasami's brother now!" Sasami scrambled between them. "If you do that, he won't be able to take me to the amusement park!"

"It's okay, Sasami-chan. I'll come back," Amagasaki laughed and placed a hand on Sasami's head. "It's okay if I come back, right?"

"Yeah." Tenchi nodded and walked his old friend out the door.

Basking in the late afternoon sun that still held the remnants of summer, the two walked slowly down the country road toward the bus stop.

"Tenchi. What are you going to do from now on?"

"Eh?" Tenchi stole a surprised look at Amagasaki's face.

"You’re an only son, right? Are you just going to take over the house without going to school?"

"Hmm..." Taken aback by the unexpected question, Tenchi looked down at the shadow stretching out from his feet. "I haven't really thought about it. I’ve been so busy every day. I’m doing all the field work and everything by myself. What about you?"

"Me? I guess I’ll start studying for entrance exams soon." Amagasaki laughed gloomily. "As you know, my parents are strict. They say I should at least go to university."

"You can do it if you try."

"You were the same way." Amagasaki sighed. "Does your dad not say anything? I always thought you’d just take over his office."

"I wonder..." It occurred to Tenchi that he had never once been told what to do.

"Azuma is going to take over his family's shop after graduation, and some guys have already quit school and left home." Amagasaki listed off the names of several friends. "Everyone’s doing their own thing. They’re all so busy with their own lives that they don't really think much about what you’re doing."

"I see." Tenchi felt relieved, but at the same time, he felt a bit left behind.

"So hang out with us once in a while. If you don't breathe some outside air sometimes, you'll turn into an old man."

"Yeah. ...You're right."

Even when they reached the bus stop, they still had plenty of time.

"It really is lonely without you. I don't have anyone I can really talk to. There are plenty of guys to talk nonsense with, but you’re the only one I can have a normal conversation with and actually feel relaxed."

"Yeah..."

For the first time in a while, Tenchi remembered the smell of school. The dusty, sweat-scented uniforms, the irritation that felt like resignation before exams, the way we used to huddle together as if we had nowhere else to go, just waiting for the day to pass...

Maybe I’m the one who has drifted far away. Without realizing it, I've moved away from Amagasaki and the others, walking to a place so distant that no one can follow...

Amagasaki looked at the now-silent Tenchi with a look that seemed almost dazzled. Or perhaps that was just an illusion, and the setting sun was simply bright.

The sound of the bus engine approached, and Tenchi looked up.

"Later."

"Yeah. See ya." Amagasaki laughed carefree and searched through his bag for his wallet. Suddenly, his hand stopped in surprise, and he pulled out a postcard.

"I almost forgot. This is the notice for the first-year class reunion."

"You brought this all the way here for me?"

Tenchi scanned the postcard. It listed the name of the fast-food place they used to hang out at after school during their first year, along with the date and time.

"They only send postcards to the guys who quit."

The bus stopped, and the door opened. "You'd better come. If you don't, I’ll tell everyone your secrets!"

"...Yeah." Tenchi laughed.

The dusty air of the schoolyard flickered through his mind, and he remembered himself back when he used to take this bus every morning.

"I got it. Tell everyone I said hi."

The door closed, and the bus drove off with the phantoms of days gone by. Tenchi watched until the bus turned the corner, then, postcard in hand, he began walking back the way he had come.

September 23rd — Sunny

Yay! I went to the amusement park!!

With Brother Amagasaki, Tenchi-niichan, Ayeka-oneesama, Ryoko-oneechan, and Sasami ♡

Big Sister and Ryoko-oneechan were fighting over Tenchi-niichan as usual, so Sasami stayed with Brother Amagasaki.

We rode the roller coaster, the Ultra Twister, and the Ferris wheel together.

The only thing I couldn't do was the bungee jump because I was too scared.

Brother Amagasaki looks scary, but he’s veeeeery kind.

Isn't it weird to say you like or dislike someone just because of their face?

Yeah, though I do think Brother should lose a little weight.

He said he’ll do the bungee jump after he loses a bit more.

So Sasami made a promise too.

That I’ll definitely do it once I’m a little bigger.

Today, Sasami felt like she wanted to take Ryo-chan along too... that’s what I thought.

The Moon-Viewing Banquet

This month, this night, under this moon... though it was a night still a few days shy of the full moon, the Princess of the Juraian Royal Family sat desolately on the veranda, gazing up at the moon as it neared its fullness.

Her eyes, clear like jewels, reflected the sharp light, and her lips remained slightly parted in a dazed expression.

"What shall I do..."

Words like a sigh escaped the Princess's lips.

"I... what am I to do?"

The Princess glanced back toward the modest house where they lived. She feared someone might interject with a quip. Fortunately, the sound of a vulgar woman’s laughter drifted out, mingling with the noise of the TV, and the Princess turned back, looking relieved.

"How dreadful..."

The Princess furrowed her brow and looked out over the shadow-draped garden. The evening calm had long since passed, and the night wind was beginning to bite.

"I shouldn't have told that story."

The Princess muttered to herself again, lifting her well-shaped chin to look at the sky.

"After finally being able to be with Lord Tenchi... Ayeka is, Ayeka is so sorrowful."

A single tear traced a path down the Princess's cheek. Ayeka hurriedly cast her eyes down and wiped the tear away with her sleeve.

"Oh, Lord Tenchi..."

Suddenly, her hair was yanked, and Ayeka nearly tumbled off the veranda.

"What 'Lord Tenchi'? When exactly did you 'get together' with Tenchi!?"

A sharp-eyed Ryoko had wound Ayeka’s long hair around her fist and was pulling it with all her might.

"Ow, ow, ow! Why do you always appear out of nowhere!?"

"It’s a commercial break, so I came to see what you were doing out here all by yourself."

"I didn't ask you to come see me!"

Ayeka finally shook off Ryoko's hand and glared back at her with eyes burning with rage.

"I hate you! Why do you always bother me? Why don't you go back and finish watching your television? I have no time left. I have no leisure to bicker with you!"

"You? The person with the most free time in this entire house?"

Ayeka was stifled for a moment, then deeply hurt.

"You have no right to say such a thing to me!"

"Rights don't matter." Ryoko, finally finding this interesting, leaned in close with a smirk. "So, why is it you have 'no time'?"

Suddenly, Ayeka’s face contorted, and tears welled up in an instant.

"You... you..." Ayeka sniffled back her tears and her nose. "What could you possibly understand!!"

Before Ryoko could pull her face back, *SMACK*, a slap landed.

"Idiot! Insensitive! Shameless! I hope you eat a boric acid ball and die!"

With that, Ayeka spun around and rushed into the house with a noisy clatter.

"Boric acid ball!?"

Ryoko stood there with a blank expression, tilting her head for a moment, then suddenly teleported and appeared in the living room.

"That brat—!"

"What did you say to her, Ryoko?" Tenchi came rushing over. "Ayeka-san was crying. What on earth happened?"

"I’m not a cockroach!"

Ryoko let her anger drive her up the stairs, but she came back down less than a second later with a grimace.

"...She's put up a barrier."

"Eh, why?" Sasami turned off the TV and looked at Tenchi. "I wonder what's wrong with Big Sister?"

"Sasami-chan, go ask her."

"Okay..."

Sasami obediently went up the stairs, but came back down a while later with a strange expression.

"She's in bed with the covers over her head, and the barrier is still up. She said it's nothing and to leave her alone."

"I wonder if she's feeling unwell..."

"I don't know." Sasami hopped onto the sofa with a troubled look. "I can't get into the room. Where should Sasami sleep?"

"I'll let you sleep with me," Ryoko said in a cooing voice. Her ulterior motive was to squeeze information about Ayeka out of her.

"No way. Ryoko-oneechan kicks in her sleep." Sasami refused flatly. In fact, the last time she slept with Ryoko in the Japanese-style room, Ryoko had hogged the futon and kicked her, making it a miserable experience. "Sasami will sleep in Tenchi-niichan's room, so it's fine. Hey, hey, will you play Uno with me again before bed?"

"Yeah, sure..."

Tenchi let out a silent sigh. *Something is wrong. What happened to Ayeka-san!?*

Just then, the lab door appeared, and Washu poked her head out.

"Oh? Where is Ayeka-dono?"

Tenchi, Ryoko, and Sasami all looked toward the stairs and shook their heads.

"I see. Well, that's fine, but a transmission came in from the Juraian Royal Family."

"The Juraian Royal Family? What did it say?" Tenchi asked.

"The Captain of the Royal Guard said, 'All preparations are complete. Please give her my regards.'"

"Captain of the Guard? What is this about?"

"When I asked that, he said it’s a state secret and he can't talk about it."

"A state secret!?"

This time, Ryoko and Tenchi looked at each other.

"A state secret, huh? That sounds fancy. Hey, Tenchi. Are you going to allow those kinds of secrets in this house?"

"Don't look at me, there's nothing I can do about it."

"That’s true. The problem is what Ayeka-dono is hiding," Washu interjected. The twinkle in her eyes was proof that her curiosity was piqued. "Alright then, a million yen to the person who finds out Ayeka-dono’s secret!"

"I’m in!" Ryoko was the first to volunteer.

"Then Sasami too."

"I'll pass." Tenchi refused immediately, but seeing Washu's smirk, he added: "Washu-san, did you even have a million yen?"

"Hmm? Well, yeah. From the perspective of a national budget, a million yen is like dust, isn't it? Money is like air—it's flying around everywhere. We just can't see the flow."

"No high-tech crimes, please," Tenchi warned the genius scientist, whose ethics were on a different plane.

"Tenchi-dono’s intuition has gotten better lately. Fine, no prize money then. Instead, how about I grant three wishes?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I want to [censored] with Tenchi. I want to be [censored] by Tenchi. I want to live while [censored] with Tenchi." Ryoko jumped in, causing the conversation to be filled with blank spaces.

"H-hey, Ryoko! What kind of talk is that in front of Sasami-chan..."

"It’s okay, Sasami will just pretend she doesn't understand because she’s a kid ♡" Living with adults had certainly made her precocious.

"Ryoko-chan, do those things on your own time. Good grief, the conversation always ends up there." Disappointed that the talk had slid into a suspicious world of floating heart marks, Washu retreated into her lab.

"Haaaah..."

Tenchi left Ryoko to her own excitement and went out into the garden.

"Just a little longer until the full moon."

The moon shone white and bright upon the earth, and Tenchi narrowed his eyes, feeling a vague sense of unease.

"Maybe Ayeka-san was crying because she was looking at the moon..."

It is autumn... it wouldn't be strange to feel sentimental, Tenchi muttered. Feeling that his questions were resolved, he forgot about the incident entirely.

The next day, Ayeka came downstairs as if nothing had happened and went about her household chores with her usual grace.

"Hey, Ayeka. A second."

Ryoko, who had seemingly been lying in wait, approached her.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry about yesterday. If you've got something on your mind, want to talk about it? You know, it's not good to worry alone, and you're the type to overthink things." When she had a motive, she could be as humble as she liked.

Ayeka looked back at Ryoko as if she were looking at a snake.

"No, I have nothing in particular to worry about. I should be the one apologizing for yesterday."

It was a blunt, dismissive response. Ryoko’s cheek twitched.

"Look, you'd better confess while I’m being nice. There's something, isn't there? Why do you have 'no time'? Is something happening with the Juraian Royal Family?"

"T-The Juraian Royal Family!?" Ayeka panicked visibly and recoiled.

"Oh? You mean you haven't heard anything from Washu? What’s this about 'preparations being complete'?"

"I have heard nothing. I am entirely unaware of such matters." Ayeka gave a response like a politician at a hearing, then turned on her heel to flee.

"Wait. There are no secrets in this house, right? Or what? Is it something you really can't tell people?"

"I said I don't know, and I mean it! It has nothing to do with you. Why must you bully me so?"

"Bully you!? Ayeka, you..."

Ryoko finally grabbed her by the collar, just as Tenchi walked in.

"Ryoko, what are you doing!? Stop it! Ayeka-san, what on earth is wrong?"

"Lord Tenchi!?" Ayeka's eyes instantly clouded with tears.

"Tch..."

As soon as Ryoko let go, Ayeka looked down and hurried out of the living room.

"What's wrong with everyone yesterday and today? It's fine to have a secret. Ryoko, you're being a bit strange."

"Yeah, yeah." Ryoko gave a smirk and suddenly vanished.

Since this was a common occurrence in the house, Tenchi wasn't surprised, but he felt more than a little dejected.

Meanwhile, Princess Ayeka, holding a newspaper clipping, was trudging up the stone steps leading to the Masaki Shrine.

"...I have no choice but to consult with my brother." She whispered to encourage herself. "I don't think Father will change his mind just because I consult him, but..."

A vertical wrinkle appeared on Ayeka's forehead. "Why are the people of the Juraian Royal Family all so stubborn!?"

Stubborn... or perhaps *headstrong*. The very brother Ayeka was going to consult was second to none in terms of being headstrong, but Ayeka was unaware that she herself deeply inherited the traits of the Juraian Royal Family.

"Brother. Brother Yosho."

When she called out in a somewhat stiff voice, there was a reply from the shrine office.

"You're late. Well, come on in."

When Ayeka entered the office, Yosho—now Katsuhito—was using a floor cushion as a pillow while watching a daytime talk show.

"Brother, do you always spend your time doing such things?"

"If I spent every moment in ritual purification, my body wouldn't last." Katsuhito stood up, brewed some tea, and offered it to Ayeka.

"Thank you." Ayeka sipped the tea distractedly, her eyes fixed on the TV screen.

"Brother, actually..."

"Wait, Ayeka. There's a giant rat."

Katsuhito suddenly took a small knife from the desk and threw it toward the ceiling. Suddenly, a woman's hand appeared and caught the blade between two fingers.

"That’s dangerous, you old geezer!" An infuriated Ryoko revealed herself.

"She’s several levels above Tenchi," Katsuhito said calmly, standing up with a wooden sword in hand. "Bad girls who eavesdrop on others' conversations deserve punishment. Old I may be, but I am still a master of the Light Hawk Sword. What do you say? Shall we have a duel?"

"...Damn it." Ryoko glared, but deciding that retreating was the better part of valor for now, she suddenly vanished.

"Goodness..."

Ayeka stood there speechless with her teacup in hand, but she set it down and shouted with trembling lips.

"You people!! I cannot bear it anymore! Is someone else's suffering really that amusing to you!?"

"Now, now, Ayeka." Katsuhito soothed his half-sister, then muttered something. "I've set up a barrier; we're safe now. Is this about Father?"

"Brother!?" Ayeka was astonished.

"I received word from Mother through Tsunami. Apparently, he is coming to fetch you on the night of the full moon."

"So you knew that much..." Ayeka sighed. "A little while ago, Father contacted me directly via ansible. He insists that I return home at least once. I know his intention. He simply cannot accept that I am living with Lord Tenchi before marriage. If I were to carelessly return at a time like this, I might never be able to come back here again. I understand Father's heart, so I refused him again and again, but he was so forceful that I... I ended up becoming stubborn out of spite..."

"Misaki-dono and Mother are quite excited about it. They say they want to see how you handle yourself."

"Oh, Mother!"

Ayeka furrowed her brow. Her selfish hope that her mother, Misaki, would intercede with her father had been crushed.

“Just what exactly did you say to him?”

Katsuhito was dying to burst out laughing, but he kept his expression neutral.

“I told him the story of Princess Kaguya. I said that if my father were to lead the entire Jurai fleet to come for me on the night of the full moon, then I would listen to what he had to say.”

“Ho… *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, is it?”

“Father cut the ansible connection without saying a word. Once I realized I’d made him angry, I was so anxious I couldn't sleep. Then yesterday, I received word from the Captain of the Guard saying that preparations were complete and to give me his regards… Oh, what shall I do! Father is serious. He is truly going to lead the fleet here, and depending on the circumstances, things could become terrible…”

“Hmm…”

The fierce temperament of the Jurai Emperor, Azusa, was well known. Everyone in the Imperial Palace knew that once he set his mind to something, he would not listen to reason. There was no doubt he would lead the entire fleet here out of pure spite. The question was which side would emerge victorious in this clash of wills.

“The night after tomorrow is the full moon. Knowing how stubborn Father is, there is no doubt he will arrive on the day I specified.”

Ayeka produced the newspaper clipping. Katsuhito pondered as he looked at the lunar phase, then smiled and returned the clipping to Ayeka.

“It’s alright. On that day, you are the protagonist. If you are Princess Kaguya, then you should simply act like Princess Kaguya.”

“What do you mean by that?” Ayeka tilted her head.

“It’s just a little substitution of the problem. Don't worry, it will definitely work out.”

Katsuhito lowered his voice, returning fully to his tone as an older brother, and began to instruct her on the ‘Method for Repelling Father.’

Upon returning from Masaki Shrine, Ayeka’s demeanor was transformed. She busied herself with housework and even directed a deeply nourishing smile toward Ryoko, which made Tenchi feel uneasy once again. In any case, such a radical change in behavior was no ordinary matter.

Ryoko was completely taken aback, watching Ayeka warily from the corner of the room. As soon as Tenchi stepped away, she flew over and began prying for every detail. Ayeka just laughed and wouldn't engage.

“It is a state secret,” Ayeka said, laughing as she added, “I shall tell you properly later.”

That evening, at the dinner table, Ayeka brought up a proposal. Since the full moon was approaching, she wanted to hold a moon-viewing banquet. Ryoko and Sasami exchanged glances, while Washu continued moving her chopsticks with a composed face.

“A moon-viewing banquet, eh? Now that’s quite elegant. Isn't it, Father-in-law?”

Nobuyuki, already in high spirits from a drink, raised a celebratory toast toward Katsuhito, who poured him more sake with an innocent expression.

“Since ancient times, this country has had many beautiful traditions. If it’s a moon-viewing banquet, you should invite Mihoshi-san and Kiyone-san too. For that matter, how about all the women wear kimonos?”

“A gathering of Princess Kaguyas, then. This should be a treat.”

Knowing nothing of the situation, Nobuyuki began telling the story of Princess Kaguya to the intensely curious Ryoko and the others, which made Ayeka’s blood run cold. Tenchi, however, saw the momentary change in Ayeka’s complexion.

“Ayeka-san, is something happening on the night of the full moon?”

“No, I was just wondering what we would do if it rained.”

Ayeka’s face clearly told a different story, but Tenchi wisely refrained from pursuing it further.

The moon-viewing banquet was to be held at Masaki Shrine. By the time the sun had set and a magnificent full moon rose into the sky, the preparations were complete. In the wide-open main hall, the entire Masaki household was joined by the talented Galaxy Police duo.

Not all the women were in kimonos; Mihoshi and Kiyone, who had rushed there from their part-time jobs, were in their everyday clothes. However, Ayeka was draped in the many layers of formal Jurai Royal dress and had applied her makeup meticulously. She looked as radiant as a celestial maiden who had descended to Earth.

“It took Big Sister three hours to get ready!”

Sasami, looking like a miniature version of a celestial maiden, was also in formal attire that she rarely wore.

“She should’ve worn something more interesting,” Ryoko remarked. Having misunderstood something, she was wearing a cape and cosplaying her old Space Pirate days.

“You look like you’ve gone back to being a pirate, so why don't you let them arrest you? It’d be good entertainment for the moon-viewing,” Washu, wearing her Academy uniform, said with a nod toward Kiyone.

“Sasami-chan, how should I eat these dango?” Mihoshi, who currently had eyes only for the food, had piled a mountain of delicacies onto her plate, earning a frown from Kiyone.

“They’re late…” Ayeka looked up at the sky restlessly. “After making such a fuss, if they don't show up, I shall never forgive them for as long as I live.”

While it would technically be more convenient if the Emperor didn't make a fuss and show up, in Ayeka’s mind, things had already flipped.

Suddenly, the moon in the night sky was abruptly clouded over, and a massive fleet appeared like a swarm of clouds.

“Brother!” Ayeka reflexively half-rose from her seat and gripped the hand of Sasami, who was sitting next to her.

“Huh? Father’s ship?”

The fleet of several thousand ships approached rapidly and came to a halt above Masaki Shrine, led by a particularly large flagship. Accompanied by the sound of exquisite music, a stairway draped in auspicious clouds appeared, reaching down to the shrine grounds.

Then, the bottom of the flagship opened, and a man dressed in exceptionally lavish clothing appeared. Accompanied by his two wives and followed by a large number of nobles, he slowly descended the stairs.

“The Emperor… of Jurai!!” Tenchi gasped at the majesty of the great fleet.

“Father! Mother!” Sasami hurriedly put on her shoes and ran joyfully toward her parents. “What happened all of a sudden? Are we going to view the moon together?”

“You look well, Sasami. Haven't you heard anything from your sister?” Misaki and Funaho knelt down beside Sasami, adjusting her collar and retying her ribbons with a peacefulness that made it seem as though they had just seen her yesterday.

“I have not come for a banquet today,” the Emperor said weightily. Upon reaching the front of the main hall, he nodded toward Ayeka.

“Now then, I have come for you as promised. Those waiting up there are the entire Juraian fleet; not a single soul is missing. Ayeka, you shall return to Jurai as promised.”

“Father, welcome.” Ayeka gave a graceful bow, then looked up and gestured toward the seat of honor. “We cannot talk while standing. Please, come up.”

“No, here is fine,” the Emperor said, shaking his head with a stubborn look. “I shall not move from here until you say ‘yes.’”

“That leaves me in quite a difficult position. I shall not run nor hide, so please, do come up. I wish to offer you a cup of sake while we speak.”

“Dear, you’re troubling the others. Well then, Ayeka-chan, if you’ll excuse us…” Misaki quickly stepped up into the hall with Funaho and waved toward the musicians.

Once the Emperor reluctantly entered the hall, the gentle music resumed, and the grounds were enveloped in an elegant atmosphere. After the initial greetings were finished and the exchange of cups had paused, the Emperor spoke.

“Nobuyuki-dono, Tenchi-dono, I thank you for looking after my unworthy daughter for so long. I, Azusa, Emperor of Jurai, have come this day to take back my daughter.”

“Really!?” Tenchi reflexively sat up straighter.

“Father, regarding that matter, I also have conditions. If you can fulfill them, I have no objection to returning.” Ayeka stared back at the Emperor with a stance that didn't yield an inch.

“The legend of Princess Kaguya, passed down in this country since ancient times, says this: 'I shall become the wife of the one who brings me a branch from Mount Horai, the robe of the fire-rat, and the cowrie shell of a swallow.' I wish to follow that example and have three wishes granted.”

“I heard nothing of this,” the Emperor said, displeased.

“Then we shall act as if the talk of my return never happened.”

“Good, good, that’s the way,” Katsuhito whispered to himself, exchanging a glance with Funaho.

“Let us hear these three wishes of yours,” Funaho offered with a smile, coming to the rescue.

“Thank you, Mother.” Ayeka straightened her back and looked around at everyone. “The first is to make me laugh from the bottom of my heart. The second is to make me cry from the bottom of my heart. The third is to move me from the bottom of my heart. Following the example of Princess Kaguya, who had her three suitors compete, I wish to have Father and Tenchi-sama compete on these three points.”

“That is a wonderful idea. In that case, we shall need judges.”

“Mother Misaki,” Katsuhito quickly cut in. “It would be best if you and Mother Funaho acted as the judges.”

Misaki and Funaho had long since guessed Katsuhito’s strategy and shared a smile behind the Emperor’s back.

“What do you think, dear? This is quite a wonderful arrangement. Even as her father, if you were to commit the boorish act of dragging her back by force, she would hate you for the rest of her life. I would be happy to accept the role of judge.”

“Then I shall follow suit,” Funaho added.

Misaki and Funaho firmly flanked the Emperor just as Katsuhito had intended; it seemed there was no escape.

“You’ve been plotting behind my back,” the Emperor glared at Katsuhito, and for a moment it looked as if he might storm out. “Very well. If I win, I shall take both my daughters and the Ryu-Oh. Yosho, I order you to return. Tenchi-dono shall begin as an officer candidate in our Juraian fleet. Is that understood?”

“I accept,” Katsuhito bowed deeply.

“Then let us begin.”

“Gramps, wait a…” Tenchi was stunned, but seeing Ayeka’s serious face, he fell silent.

“Now then, please play Rock-Paper-Scissors, you two.”

The Emperor and Tenchi stepped down into the grounds and faced Ayeka in the center, and Misaki called out.

“Rock, paper, scissors!”

“I go first, then.” The Emperor wore a confident smile.

“Hey, what the hell is going on!?” Ryoko poked Washu in the side.

“Just watch, just watch. If you keep talking, you’ll miss the showdown of the century.”

“Ayeka. How is this!?” The Emperor strode up to Ayeka and suddenly used his ten fingers to rearrange her facial features.

“Pffft—hahahaha!” The audience burst into laughter. Since both judges, Ayeka herself, and Tenchi all started laughing, the Emperor’s advantage was clear.

“Now, Tenchi-dono.” Misaki smiled and nodded toward Tenchi.

“Ayeka-san, sorry!” Tenchi hesitantly walked behind Ayeka and gave her a token tickle.

“Stop it, Tenchi-sama~.” Ayeka squirmed, but compared to the previous explosive fit, it was clear that the power had dropped significantly.

“One point for Emperor Azusa.” As both judges raised their fans, the score became 2 to 0.

“Now for the second hurdle. Tenchi-dono goes first.”

“Ayeka-san, the truth is…” Tenchi felt guilty, but he whispered the secret plan Katsuhito had given him.

“Y-You must be joking!? Tenchi-sama is not that kind of person!” Ayeka staggered. “No… for Tenchi-sama to do such a…”

Tears rapidly welled up in Ayeka’s eyes and flowed down her cheeks.

“We can't hear you!” a voice called out from the sidelines.

“Tenchi, what did you say!?”

Funaho and Misaki looked at each other. “Tenchi-dono. Please say it once more so the judges can hear.”

“No way! I can't possibly say it.” Tenchi waved his hands frantically.

“That will be a significant deduction, or perhaps even disqualification.”

“Tenchi-sama! What do you mean, you ‘made a mistake’ with Ryoko!?” Ayeka’s shout caused an uproar among the group.

“You… such nonsense…” Washu stepped on the cape of the lunging Ryoko, causing her to fall headfirst and collide with the floor of the hall.

“Tenchi-dono, is that the truth!?” The Emperor flew into a rage, drew his sword, and closed in on Tenchi. “To lay a hand on my daughter while being

intimate with another woman is an unpardonable atrocity. Come, fight me fairly!!”

“W-Wait a minute!” Tenchi ducked under the naked blade and desperately grabbed the Emperor’s arm.

“Unforgivable!! I shall strike you down this instant!”

Suddenly, the Emperor clutched his chest and staggered. “Ugh…” The sword slipped powerlessly from his hand, and he collapsed to the ground, leaning against Tenchi.

“Father!?” A pale Ayeka rushed over. “What’s wrong!? Father, stay with me!”

“Ayeka…” The Emperor opened his eyes slightly. “I might be finished. If you will grant your father’s final wish, let my ashes be placed at the root of the Royal Tree…”

“Don't say such things!” Ayeka’s face was contorted with tears. “I will return to the Juraian Royal Family. I will stay by your side until you are better. So…”

“Is that the truth?” The Emperor sat up abruptly and brushed the dust off his clothes. “In that case, I win.”

“Father!?” Ayeka remained sitting on the ground, staring up at the Emperor in stunned silence.

“One point for Emperor Azusa!”

“One point for Tenchi-dono!”

Amidst a roar of applause, the match became 3 to 1.

“Now for the third hurdle. Emperor Azusa goes first.”

With Funaho’s solemn voice, the Emperor reached out a hand.

“Ayeka, I am sorry for startling you. But could you not take this as an excess of zeal born from my love for you? It is you who made me so stubborn. The Royal Palace where you and Sasami cannot be seen is like a fire that has gone out. I know you are living happily here, but I am lonely. So much so that I cannot sleep at night. I see your form in my dreams and look for Sasami at the breakfast table; in those days, my body and soul have worn thin…”

The Emperor suddenly pulled Ayeka into an embrace and stroked her hair as if holding a young child.

“Just once is enough, even just for a week—won't you return to the Royal Palace?”

“Father…” The honest Ayeka could do nothing about the trembling of her lips. “I’m sorry. Ayeka is… Ayeka is a bad girl. To think that Father was so saddened…”

“Say you will return, Ayeka!” In the Emperor’s voice, there was a truth that certainly went beyond words. Even Ryoko, who had much she wanted to say, gasped, and for a moment Tenchi felt a lump in his throat.

“Ayeka-san, I’m dropping out.”

Tenchi walked slowly across the grounds and sat on the veranda.

“I didn't really want to compete from the beginning. I understand how much you want to stay here, but why don't you go back for a visit?”

“Tenchi-sama!?” Ayeka turned around from within the Emperor’s embrace.

“I’ll always be here, and you and Sasami-chan can come whenever you want. Emperor, I’m sorry for lying earlier.” Tenchi bowed his head sincerely. “Lying just for the sake of a competition, I’m an idiot, aren't I? I… I love both Ayeka-san and Sasami-chan very much. If possible, I want you to stay here forever. But that’s for Ayeka-san to decide.”

“Tenchi-sama, I’m sorry…” Ayeka slipped quietly out of the Emperor’s arms, but she didn't go toward Tenchi; she came to a halt. “Because of my selfishness, I’ve made both Father and Tenchi-sama feel sad… Ayeka shall return to Jurai and become a little more of an adult. To toy with people’s hearts over a competition… I am the one who should apologize.”

Ayeka looked down and bit her lip, but then she lifted her face to clear the shadows and smiled brightly.

“But please, wait for me. Ayeka shall surely return here. I shall return having become a woman worthy of Tenchi-sama. So, please… leave my room just as it is…”

Tears overflowed from Ayeka’s clear eyes, unable to be held back any longer.

“Tenchi-sama, goodbye…”

“Match over!” The two judges said in unison.

“One point for Tenchi-dono!” Both Misaki and Funaho raised their fans.

“3 points for Emperor Azusa, 3 points for Tenchi-dono. It’s a draw, isn't it?”

“Misaki-san, I didn't intend for…”

“I suppose that leaves it to the judges' decision?” Misaki gave Tenchi a wink, as if to say no more unnecessary talking was allowed.

“I’ve lost,” the Emperor muttered reluctantly. “What an utterly thankless role. To think I spent half the national budget to come all this way, only to have my daughter cry in front of me.”

“Dear, no lying allowed,” Funaho said with a laugh, pinning him down.

“Royal ships don’t exactly run on mineral resources, you know. I’m certain Tenchi-dono will become a great ruler who surpasses even you in the future. I think it’s perfectly fine to leave Princess Ayeka in his care like this.”

“Indeed.”

Emperor Azusa nodded weightily toward Tenchi.

“Then it is time for the loser to make a swift exit.”

“Emperor Azusa!”

Tenchi reflexively stood up.

“I don’t feel like I’ve won or anything, and I didn't mean for it to be like that. Please, if you’d like, stay and relax for a while.”

“No, no, it is quite alright, Tenchi-dono. When one has fought fairly and lost, one must accept it. There are not many men in this vast universe who have bested the Emperor of Jurai. Continue forward without losing that courage and honest heart.”

The Emperor approached Tenchi and held out a large, powerful hand.

“That said, there’s no reason to turn down such a kind invitation. Shall I join the moon-viewing banquet?”

The full moon hung in the mid-sky, and with the arrival of the new guests, the banquet reached its peak. The elegant sounds of music reminiscent of the Heian capital filled the autumn night, and Princess Ayeka, who had failed to become Princess Kaguya, smiled happily by her father’s side.

“Everyone, I am so sorry for causing such a commotion.”

“Emperor. What did you actually come here for, anyway?” Ryoko muttered discontentedly. “You brought that whole fleet; you might as well have put a rope around her neck and dragged her back with you.”

“Oh? I thought you two had become best friends, but it seems you’ve reverted to a pirate. Do you want a rope that badly?”

“We aren't best friends. We’re rivals in love.”

“Then as fellow rejected souls, you are my comrade!”

The Emperor forcibly pulled Ryoko toward him and declared loudly, “Hey! Let’s put a rope around this one’s neck and take her back with us!”

“Dear!?” Misaki and Funaho looked at each other.

“Go for it, Ryoko. Become an adopted daughter and let them teach you some manners,” Tenchi teased.

“No way!”

Ryoko snapped back at Tenchi, but then suddenly burst out laughing. “I’ll just take over the Juraian Royal Family.”

“Go ahead and run wild. My Juraian fleet is quite formidable!”

The Emperor broke into a wide grin, and for a moment, Ayeka felt as though she had caught a fleeting vision of the far-distant future in the midst of the banquet.

“Father, you’re plotting something wicked, aren't you? I have no intention of inheriting the bad traditions of the Juraian Royal Family.”

“What’s the harm in having more than one Princess Kaguya?”

The Emperor looked at his future successor, who remained blissfully unaware, and smiled secretly.

October 1st — Sunny

The Masaki Family Bento imagined by Sasami! (What if everyone were food?)

- **Tenchi-niichan…** White rice.
- **Ryoko-oneechan…** Super spicy curry.
- **Ayeka-oneesama…** Super high-grade ikura (salmon roe). (Wait, ikura curry might be gross...)
- **Washu-chan…** Multi-vitamin tablet.
- **Mihoki-yo-oneechan…** Natto and mustard. (Always together ♡)
- **Nobuyuki-otousan…** Nori seaweed. (Because he's okay with anything)
- **Yosho-niichan…** Takuan (pickled radish). (Totally settled in)
- **Ryo-Ohki…** Carrots.
- **Sasami…** Pickles. (The best friend of rice! We're inseparable! Just kidding ♡)

George-san, of course, is the Chef. Maybe an Iron Chef?

...But this bento sounds like it tastes terrible... Gross!

December 24th — Cloudy, then Sunny

Jingle bells, jingle bells...

Tomorrow is a fun Christmas!

Well, I say that, but today Sasami almost had a huge disaster.

There’s a big fir tree in the garden. Everyone was decorating it since morning, but Ryoko-oneechan hogged all the high spots. (Well, she's the only one who can fly, after all.)

But Sasami really wanted to put the big star on the very top. Ryoko-oneechan offered to hold me up, but I said no. Tenchi-niichan brought a giant stepladder, and I climbed higher and higher. Halfway up, the ladder wasn't tall enough, and I needed just a little more reach...

Just as I stood on my tiptoes holding the star, I felt my foot slip. I fell headfirst just like in a scary dream I once had... everything went dark... and when I snapped out of it, Tenchi-niichan was holding me.

Ah, Sasami... was alive.

Tenchi-niichan saved me.

Before I knew it, tears started coming, and I cried like a baby. Tenchi-niichan was covered in dirt, but he smiled and patted my head.

“I’m so glad... I happened to be right underneath,” he said.

My heart gave a little squeeze, and I couldn't say “thank you” right away.

At night, looking out the second-story window at the golden star shining on the top of the fir tree (Ryoko-oneechan ended up putting it there), my heart gave that squeeze again.

I hope this happiness lasts forever and ever.

I hope this happiness lasts forever and ever.

When I prayed to the baby God who will be born tomorrow, I felt like I understood something. Christmas is the day when you can feel closest to how God feels... I think.

Afterword

Hello to all you Tenchi fans.

Following the "World Conquest," I bring you the eighth volume of our gift-wrapped assortment set. Carefully selected natural ingredients (including those from outer space), strict quality control (including wishful thinking and hard effort), and a variety to satisfy even a gourmet palate (or so I hope).

Normally, I'd put a disclaimer here:

"While we take the utmost care in manufacturing for quality, if you notice any issues, please contact our Customer Service Department."

Though I feel like someone might send me razor blades for that, so I'll keep the jokes to a minimum. To be honest, short stories are... difficult.

In previous books, we often left Earth or the seasons weren't clear, so for this "Tenchi," I tried to give it a seasonal almanac feel. Actually, while I was writing the serialization for *Monthly Dragon Magazine*, I was writing about Golden Week or Obon months in advance, so it felt a bit "Wait, what?" at times.

Did you feel the seasonal breeze blowing around the Masaki household?

Now, our protagonist Tenchi-kun, who lives a life more upright than most while enduring many hardships, naturally has "ordinary days" too. Ordinary days... days where nothing particularly worth mentioning happened, I suppose. (Tenchi-kun would probably interject with, "There's no way a day like that exists!")

I'm thinking now that it might have been nice to write about a day like that for the Masaki family. But when I actually try to imagine it...

Scenario 1: A morning like any other arrives. The Masaki house is still quiet in sleep, but soon Tenchi or Sasami will wake up, and a noisy day will surely begin. Peeking into the second-floor bedroom, Tenchi hasn't moved a muscle with his eyes closed. The hands of the alarm clock on the desk have stopped. The digital clock on the stereo and the air conditioner that should be on a timer are also dead. A power outage? No, the power is on. A breakdown? No... because a piece of memo paper, seemingly blown by the AC, is frozen in mid-air 30 centimeters above the floor... Oh no! Time has stopped!?

Scenario 2: A morning like any other arrives. The Masaki house is still quiet in sleep, but soon Tenchi or Sasami will wake up, and a noisy day will surely begin. Peeking into the second-floor bedroom, Sasami has just tossed and turned, drenched in sweat. Noticing the movement, Ayeka opens her eyes.

"What's wrong, Sasami?" "Big Sister... Sasami feels sick... I can't get up..."

Oh no! Sasami-chan caught a cold!?

It seems like nothing good ever happens... (though the "no good" part might just be Hasegawa's head). Well then, how about something like this?

One afternoon, George—Washu-chan's secretary and the Masaki family cook—was in the kitchen prepping dinner. Chestnuts, matsutake mushrooms, saury... a menu full of the tastes of autumn. Then, *Ding-dong*, the doorbell rings. Standing at the entrance is a man with a sharp gaze, dressed in a chef's style.

"I've finally found you, George, the wandering cook! Now, duel me!"

"You... Masa of the Cleaver!?"

That night, the people of the Masaki family ate a delicious dinner until they were full.

Well, I just wondered if a miracle like that might drop into the Hasegawa household.

So (what do you mean "so"!?), George-san, Sasami-chan, please come visit the Hasegawa house (the rest of you can enjoy yourselves in Okayama). I'll have the apron and knives ready... so thinks the demonic Hasegawa.

At the midnight workstation,

Naoko Hasegawa